

Video Watchdog®

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Guide to
Fantastic Video

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GORDON HESSLER Interview!

ERASERHEAD! PSYCH-OUT! THE TRIP!

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Guide to
Fantastic Video

No. 98 / AUG 2003

"I prefer good manners in the theatre
to violence in the streets."

—MURDER BY DECREE (1979)

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Suppressed for more than 30 years, the original director's cuts of Gordon Hessler's four horror films for AIP are now available for viewing on DVD! *Tim Lucas* offers a reassessment of Hessler's work, while comparing the various versions of **THE OBLONG BOX** (1969), **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** (1969), **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** (1970) and **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** (1971)!

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- Front: Vincent Price intuits the fearful looming of the unexplainable in Gordon Hessler's **THE OBLONG BOX** (1969), now available on DVD from MGM Home Entertainment.
- Inside: Alister Williamson cuddles Sally Geeson in a rare color promotional shot for **THE OBLONG BOX**.
- Back: Eye-popping shots of Susan Strasberg, Peter Fonda and Bruce Dern in **THE TRIP** (1967), and Jack Nicholson in **PSYCH-OUT** (1968)—now available on a wild double-feature DVD from MGM Home Entertainment.

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JOHN CHARLES is one of the contributors to *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA: A GUIDE TO HONG KONG, TAIWANESE AND MAINLAND CHINESE CINEMA*, due from Simon & Schuster at the end of 2003.

BILL COOKE has resumed work on a book about horror comics.

SHANE M. DALLMANN wishes to congratulate Bob Hinton (aka The "Ghastlee" One) and the lovely Suspira on the occasion of their upcoming wedding.

JOE DANTE's new movie **LOONEY TUNES BACK IN ACTION** opens coast-to-coast on November 14.

DAVID DEL VALLE has been a valued contributor to VW since our sixth issue. This issue's conversation with Gordon Hessler marks David's 10th VW interview.

TIM LUCAS and **CHARLIE LARGENT** are the authors of *SUNSHINE BLVD.*, an original comic screenplay about Roger Corman that won the approval of Corman himself. They are represented by Judy Coppage/The Coppage Company.

KIM NEWMAN will be spending a week living in early 19th Century conditions for a UK TV docudrama series *THE REGENCY HOUSE*, staging a gothic drama in a mansion in the wilds of Hertfordshire.

M.J. SIMPSON reviews odd films and interviews interesting film-makers at www.mjsimpson.co.uk.

RICHARD HARLAND SMITH and John Charles recently spent some quality time together pumping much needed capital into the sagging economy of New York's Chinatown and various videotape liquidation outlets.

NATHANIEL THOMPSON reviews new DVD releases at Mondo Digital (www.mondo-digital.com).

REBECCA & SAM UMLAND have embarked on a viewing of the entire 1967-68 TV series *THE INVADERS*. Roy Thinnes may have failed to convince a disbelieving world that the nightmare has already begun... but he has the Umlands convinced.

DOUGLAS E. WINTER, most recently the author of *CLIVE BARKER: THE DARK FANTASTIC*, continues to search for weapons of mass destruction in bars surrounding Washington, D.C.

VW THANKS & PHOTO SOURCES:

Absurda (50-55), Anchor Bay Entertainment/Sue Procko PR (59), Blue Underground/Bill Lustig (69), Juanita Bowman, Cinematics Publishing/John B. Murray, Columbia Home Video (63), Diabolik DVD/Jesse Nelson (4-6 ©Columbia Pictures), GBU Publishing (Lee Pfeiffer), Image Entertainment/Spencer Savage (56), Manga Video (9-11), McFarland and Company, MGM Home Entertainment/Christine Simmons/BHI (front, 22-48, 65, 66, back), MTI Home Video (15), Christian Ostermeier Collection (inside, 27, 28 ©MGM Home Entertainment), Poker Industries/Michael Basden (72), Something Weird Video/Mike Vraney, Lisa Petrucci (61), VCI Entertainment/Bob Blair, Bea Suarez (13, 14), Bob Villard Collection (17 ©Toho, 19 ©Warner Bros., 21 ©Universal), Xploited Cinema/Tony Simonelli (71) and—space being tight—That's All, Folks!

ARTWORK: Charlie Largent (cover), Pete Fitzgerald (16). **LOGO & COVER FORMAT:** Radomir Perica (International Design Studio, Bethesda MD).

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THE WATCHDOG BARKS



T'S A VERY STRANGE

time here at VIDEO WATCHDOG, folks. My horoscope tells me that Mercury, my ruler, and Venus have joined the Sun in my birthsign, whatever that means; it seems to mean that positive forces are on the side of my creativity. As busy as we've been in the past, it appears that Donna and I really didn't know the meaning of "busy" till just recently. In addition to producing your eagerly-awaited monthly dose of VW, we are rapidly closing in on our 100th issue—a milestone event that we have no intention of glossing over, though there are plenty of other projects competing for our attention.

The biggest among these right now, of course, is MARIO BAVA—ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK, which (as I write this) is in the earliest stages of layout. We've taken digital photos of over 2,000 stills and posters from all over the globe to use as illustration guides; these will help us to decide which images to use in the book, and once these decisions are made, the selected items need to be scanned or photographed again... for keeps. The book is going to be huge and a major design challenge for Donna, so we've decided to compile two issues of VW—#s 98 and 99—back-to-back in a two-week period (it usually takes two weeks to produce a single issue), in order to free up nine weeks that we can devote solely to the locking down the look of the Bava book. Then, when the book goes to the printer, we buckle down all over again to VW #100—the issue in which... never mind; you'll see.

Sometimes families conceive unexpectedly—and that's sort of what happened to me at the end of April, when I got the idea for an original screenplay. A comedy. About Roger Corman. I usually disregard ideas for screenplays automatically, knowing how hard it is to break into the business and not being geographically well-placed to pursue such a career, but I shared the idea with Charlie Largent, who lives in LA and had a recent TWILIGHT ZONE sale, and the cauldron between us began to bubble. Thirteen crazed days later—now represented by a colossal phone bill

and over 100 pages of e-mail correspondence—we were holding a finished script. To our amazement and delight, the script won the enthusiastic approval of Roger Corman himself and Charlie and I were signed to a two-year screenwriting contract with a respected Hollywood agency. The script is stirring up a very nice buzz, and some major players have expressed interest in getting it produced. If the movie gets made next year, it will coincide with Roger Corman's 50th anniversary as a motion picture producer. While the Bava book took 28 slow years to gestate, I love this 13-day script just as much and it may represent even more of a growth process for me. It's the most commercial venture I've ever been associated with, and working with Charlie was a pleasure. Now that our feet are in the door, we want to write more movies.

But first, I have an obligation to write a new novel for Simon & Schuster, which needs to be delivered just a month or two after you're holding VW #100 in your hands. It's in progress already, but while Donna is using the upcoming nine weeks to create the book you've all been waiting to read, I'll be using most of that time to produce a first draft. I'm given hope that I can actually pull this off by the fact that Donna's going to be wholly absorbed in a project of her own; the last time I wrote a novel (still unpublished, unfortunately), it was because she was so engrossed in a quilting project that I felt literally pushed into a creative retreat of my own. I wrote the first draft of that novel in twelve days.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, I managed to write this issue's cover story, to complement David Del Valle's interview with Gordon Hessler. A proper study of Hessler's AIP movies is something I've wanted to write for several years, and MGM's release of these titles in fully restored "director's cut" editions provided the perfect excuse for the undertaking. I think I've now written enough VW articles about how AIP reworked European horror films for the American market to fill up a book... but that will have to wait for another year.

Till then, enjoy the issue!

..... Tim Lucas

WATCHDOG NEWS

EEK!

It's SAMUEL Z. on DVD!

By M.J. Simpson

A British company called Digital Video Distribution Ltd. (www.dvdisc.co.uk), working in tandem with United Energy Entertainment, has acquired the rights to 35 movies originally produced by James H. Nicholson & Samuel Z. Arkoff's American International Pictures. Four titles to date have been released in "The Arkoff Film Library" on PAL VHS and PAL Region 2 DVD, of which three are worth seeking out.

HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER (1958, 73m 4s) is director Herbert L. Strock and producer Herman Cohen's follow-up to **I WAS A TEENAGE FRANKENSTEIN** (1957) and **I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF** (1958). Not a sequel to either movie, it's a film about the making of a "sequel," offering a tantalizing (yet utterly phony) glimpse behind the scenes at AIP. Robert H. Harris stars as make-up man Pete Dumond (misidentified as "Pete Drummond" on the sleeve), sacked by new studio owners keen to abandon monster pictures in favor of teenage musicals. His revenge involves prepping his teenage monster actors with a special make-up base that makes them susceptible to hypnotic suggestion, a lunatic plot which makes for a very enjoyable film. At 62m 15s, the B&W picture bursts into Technicolor for its final reel,



which famously features Paul Blaisdell monster masks from three other AIP features: **THE SHE-CREATURE**, **IT CONQUERED THE WORLD** and **INVASION OF THE SAUCER-MEN**. For some reason, two individual shots (at 61m 41s and 71m 48s, respectively) are very badly scratched, presumably original negative damage. Readers in

search of additional information about this movie are directed to our review of Columbia's domestic VHS release in VW 8:13.

*A cumbersome fashion accessory spells doom for this unfortunate citizen in Bert I. Gordon's **THE SPIDER**, now available on Region 2 DVD as part of "The Arkoff Film Library."*

WAR OF THE COLOSSAL BEAST (1958, 68m 26s) is a true sequel and also blooms into color at the end, though only for 30s. This is Bert I. Gordon's continuation of **THE AMAZING COLOSSAL MAN** (1957): presumed dead, the 60' freak Glenn Manning (Dean Parkin) is discovered alive (but gruesomely disfigured) in Mexico by his sister and brought back to LA where he goes on the traditional rampage. George Worthing Yates' script has some uncharacteristically satirical moments, as when three government departments argue over who should be responsible for men 60' tall. The climactic color footage is in passable condition but not as exciting as one might expect, and if shorn of approximately 5m of reprised

highlights from the first film, the movie would be scarcely an hour long.

THE SPIDER (1958, 72m 33s, sleeve title) is better known as the **EARTH VS. THE SPIDER** (disc and print title). Another rampaging giant flick from Bert I. Gordon, this one sees a 40' tarantula threaten a small American town. As with **WAR**, the special effects—a mix of mattes and back projection, attributed to Gordon himself and then-wife Flora—are intermittently successful, and as with **HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER**, there is an intrusive rock'n'roll scene. Here it's a high school band (led by Skip Young, "Wally" from **THE ADVENTURES OF OZZIE & HARRIET**) whose practice session is so swinging that it awakens the supposedly

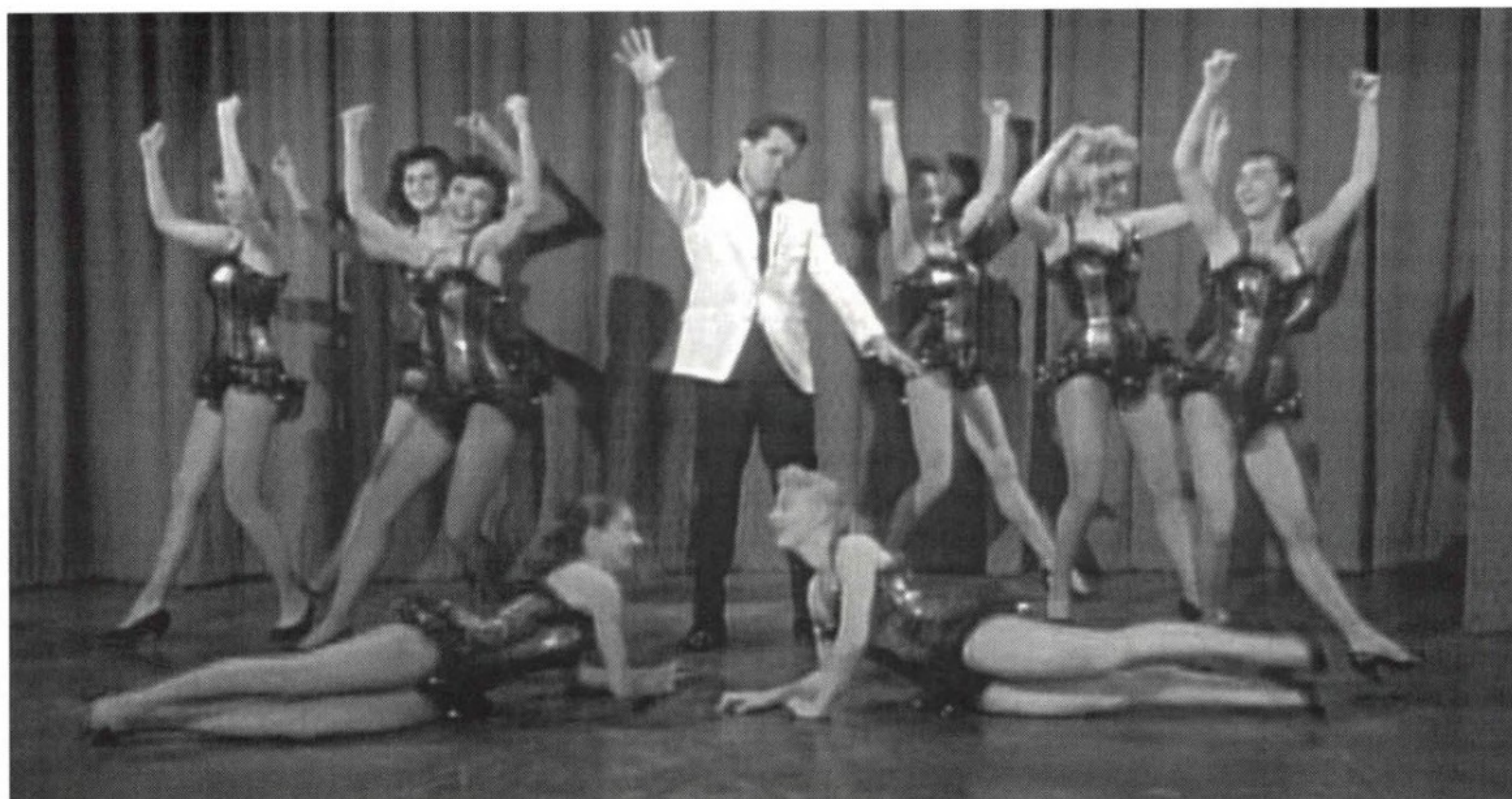
dormant arachnid. Lead actress June Kenney's name is misspelled on the sleeve. We reviewed Columbia's domestic tape release in VW 10:12.

The quality of these titles is quite acceptable, though at least two of them appear to be struck from 16mm television prints or (more likely) syndication 1" tape masters, to judge from the blurring one occasionally sees when stepping through the action. **THE SPIDER** is the best-looking of the three, with deep blacks and excellent contrasts, with **WAR OF THE COLOSSAL BEAST** only a notch or two below that, while **HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER** looks a little soft.

While these three titles are nicely presented, Roger Corman's science fiction debut

After a presumably fatal fall at the end of THE AMAZING COLOSSAL MAN, Glenn Manning (Dean Parkin) returns just a little the worse for wear in WAR OF THE COLOSSAL BEAST.





Gotta have "Eee-ooo"? The only place you can find John Ashley's classic *HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER* production number on DVD is on a Region 2 disc!

DAY THE WORLD ENDED (1956, 78m 20s) has been released in barely watchable condition. Seven survivors of a nuclear attack (including Paul Birch, Lori Nelson, Adele Jergens and Mike "Touch" Connors) find themselves thrust together in an isolated cabin. All the stock Corman characters are here: the violent hoodlum, his stripper girlfriend, the grizzly old-timer brewing moonshine. The film is chiefly remembered as the debut of Paul Blaisdell as both creator and wearer of the silly-looking three-eyed "mutant" costume.

The standard frame presentation does little to mar the other films, which were shot in a 1.66:1 ratio, but **DAY** is much more obviously affected. Filmed in SuperScope (a fake widescreen process that effectively matted an existing standard image to an anamorphic width), the opening and closing titles are correctly letterboxed, but the rest of the film, being a cropped presentation of an already matted picture,

effectively delivers only ¼ of the original image! Characters in group shots are frequently heard but not seen, and one static two-shot is simply two shoulders talking to each other! The print is also softer-looking than the other films and exhibits plentiful scratches throughout, with occasional gate float. **DAY** is followed by a "Distributed by Teleworld Inc.," which cements the TV print theory. (The same logo appears on **HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER**, but not the other two titles.) Mike "Touch" Connors' name is misspelled on the sleeve, which sports a rare color still of the mutant.

Included on each disc are nine trailers: including **VOODOO WOMAN**, **BLOOD OF DRACULA**, **THE BRAIN EATERS**, **THE SHE-CREATURE**, **REFORM SCHOOL GIRL** and the four titles at hand. All are scratchy, with **THE SHE-CREATURE** in the worst shape, and several are cut short before the title spreads across the screen one last time. **THE SPIDER** ("Nothing sends the cats

like the presence of out of this world horror!") is credited as such, **DAY** is called "*THE 'DAY THE WORLD ENDED'*" and **HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER** has a curious greenish tint which turns bright pink for the Technicolor footage. There are also nine postcards with each disc, reproducing the original one-sheet posters which form the basis of the sleeve designs, with **THE UNDEAD** replacing **REFORM SCHOOL GIRL**.

A real treat is a generous audio interview with Sam Arkoff himself (50m 49s), which is included on all four discs. Recorded on August 11th, 1991 at London's National Film Theatre, this session plays over a repeated montage of five B&W photographs taken at the event. (The photographer is credited, though interviewer Neil Norman is not.) This is terrific stuff, with the voluble Arkoff in full flow for up to 20 minutes at a time. The region-free discs have optional Dutch and German subtitles, attractive

animated menus, and eight to nine chapters per film.

With their poster-derived cover art, postcards, nifty supplements and (mostly) presentable transfers, UEE/DVDL's efforts with this series are highly collectable and worthy of support. **THE SHE-CREATURE** and **THE BRAIN EATERS** are scheduled for July release, with the remaining four titles from the first batch—**THE UNDEAD**, **BLOOD OF DRACULA**, **VOODOO WOMAN** and **REFORM SCHOOL GIRL**—following later this year. There may also be a boxed set with some different/additional extras released near Christmas. UEE/DVDL also have an option on another 25 AIP classics, but whether or not these materialize depends on how well the first ten sell.

Priced at only £11.99 each (and also available on PAL VHS, without extras, for £7.99), the "Arkoff Film Library" discs are available from various online import retailers—including Diabolik DVD (www.diabolikdvd.com; see Sources for more information), where they are priced at \$20.99.

Ichi'ng for More?

By Nathaniel Thompson

Already a title destined for VW's history books, Takashi Miike's feast of hyperbolic violence, **ICHI THE KILLER** [*Koroshiya 1*, 2001], appeared less than a year after its theatrical debut with an English subtitled edition courtesy of Universe in Hong Kong. Also featuring optional subtitles in traditional or simplified Chinese, the disc—Category III rating notwithstanding—was severely hobbled by the removal of nearly all of its violent highlights (including much sexualized brutality). The Region 3 NTSC release,

which made mincemeat of even the opening titles sequence, left many multiregion-capable fans confused by its piecemeal editing and refusal to wallow in the excessive highlights of such previous favorites as **DEAD OR ALIVE**.


However, a remedy for fans of the ultimate "Crybaby Killer" is available in the form of a Region 2 PAL release from the Netherlands. Ostensibly aimed at Dutch audiences, but blatant in its bid for the international English-speaking collector, Japan Shock's double-platter edition, housed in a stylish, crumpled newspaper-themed cardboard sleeve, features the uncensored film in Japanese 5.1 with optional English subtitles or, for those who crave dubbing with their depravity, an English 4.0 audio track. The anamorphically enhanced 1.85:1 transfer looks exceptional.

The second disc is comprised entirely of extras, all featuring English-friendly subtitles (but curiously with little to no concessions for Dutch viewers). An interview gallery features discussions with Miike, lead Tadanobu Asano, the fetching "Alien Sun" (Paulyn Sun), and director/manga legend Shinya Tsukamoto, who appears in the film as the unreliable Jijii. The promotional archive includes the Japanese and European trailers, a electronic press kit, and still gallery. Behind-the-scenes includes seven shot-on-video documents of sequences from the film, including a detailed account of the memorable rooftop finale. "Film Notes" is a worthy, uncredited sketch of the film's major players, reading more like unusually detailed liner notes; the disc is rounded off with bios and filmographies for Miike, Tsukamoto and Asano.

New Cushing Book Taking Pre-orders

IN ALL SINCERITY... PETER CUSHING, a new reference book about the life and career of the late British actor, has been completed by author Christopher Gullo (acting president of The Peter Cushing Association) and pre-orders are now being accepted by GBU Publishing (www.gbupublishing.com).

The 192 page book, with a Foreword by Sir Nigel Hawthorne, breaks down the actor's career into decades from his very beginnings in local theater, his stint in Hollywood, and his rise to fame as Britain's "Mr. Television," the King of Hammer Horror and his final career triumph as Grand Moff Tarkin in **STAR WARS**. Over 60 actors and directors have contributed to the book, including Val Guest, Francis Matthews, Brian Cox, Forrest J. Ackerman, Yvonne Monlaur, Mark Hamill, John Carpenter and Caroline Munro. The book will also include over 100 photos, many seeing print here for the first time, including pages from Cushing's annotated scripts, his 1938 visa to the United States, a letter sent to him by renown playwright Noel Coward, and a dedication from his life-long love Helen Beck six months before their marriage. Gullo promises Cushing's fans a personal look at a very talented and much-missed man.

The hardback edition of IN ALL SINCERITY... PETER CUSHING will be limited to only 100 copies, each signed and numbered by the author. The book must be ordered from the British website of GBU Publishing at www.gbupublishing.com, at a cost of £24.95 (approximately US\$40.00), plus postage. American customers can also phone their information to (732) 752-7257. All major credit cards and PayPal are accepted. —TL 

VIDEO TAPE VINE

Gladiators: 7
Astro Boy: 9

ASTRO BOY VOLUME 7

1982, Manga Video, HF/S/+,
\$19.95, 145m 8s, VHS

ASTRO BOY VOLUME 8

1982, Manga Video, HF/S/+,
\$19.95, 145m 7s, VHS

ASTRO BOY VOLUME 9

1982, Manga Video, HF/S,
\$19.95, 145m 12s, VHS

By Shane M. Dallmann

As the demand for color programming gradually nudged Osamu Tezuka's popular B&W animated series ASTRO BOY from American syndication in the 1970s, the creator responded by reviving his heroic boy robot in a full-color, 51-episode update for the 1980s. The new series, however, proved a difficult sell; not for lack of color, but due to its not-infrequent use of questionable and/or provocative material. Vivid cartoon violence (which went the extra mile when robotic characters were involved) was the order of the day, and the series seldom shied away from racial, political or even religious themes. Only now has 1982's ASTRO BOY been made available in America; we reviewed the first three volumes in VW 89:11 and Volumes 4-6 in VW 93:9—the

final eighteen episodes are contained in these last three volumes from Manga Video. All series episodes are credited to director Noboru Ishiguro onscreen—the packaging also gives directorial credit to the late Tezuka, who scripted the series in collaboration with Noboru Shiroyama.

ASTRO BOY VOLUME 7 opens with "The Robot Stuntman," in which Astro's sister Uran (pronounced "you-rain") gets a "behind the scenes" movie-making lesson. Superstar Tom Stanton, best known as screen hero "Super

A NOTE ON TIMINGS

The timings listed for the following tapes reflect only the length of the film itself, and do not include such ephemera as video company logos, FBI warnings, supplementary trailers, or MPAA ratings certificates. The only exceptions to this rule are those films in which the soundtrack is first heard while the distributor's logo is still onscreen.

KEY

+	Supplements
16:9	WS TV Adaptable
CC	Closed Captioned
D	Digital
DD	Dolby Digital
DTS	Digital Theater Systems (Audio)
DVD-0	No Region Code
DVD-1	USA, Canada
DVD-2	Europe, Japan
DVD-3	Most of Asia
HF	Hi-Fi
LB	Letterboxed
MA	Multiple Audio
NSR	No Suggested Retail
OOP	Out of Print
P&S	Pan&Scan
S	Stereo
SS	Surround Sound
ST	Subtitles

Zero,” is something less than the sum of his parts—not only is he doubled in his action scenes, but said double is a miniature robot acting on miniature sets! Astro and Uran must protect the diminutive stuntman from such perils as the ubiquitous robotic shark of Movieland.

In a Christmas episode, “The Light Ray Robot” wins a trade show after impressing the audience with its power of invisibility—but that doesn’t prevent it from being stolen by Astro’s old enemy Skunk (whose full name of “Sukanku Kusai” can be spotted onscreen). Typically, Skunk uses his acquisition to commit a series of crimes on his behalf (attributed to a ghost, in this case), and it’s up to Astro to set things right—but can he protect his fellow robot from harm at the same time?

“The Time Machine” shares a title with H.G. Wells but takes its story in a decidedly different direction. Detective Rock arrives from the future to escort Astro back to the 15th century—it seems that dire consequences are in store unless a prince of the past can be protected from the evil magician Gor. The question is, what is Gor doing with robotic servants in that day and age? This episode is further highlighted by Booko—a talking duck with a “Moe” haircut—and by a three-headed dragon that bears more than a passing resemblance to perennial Godzilla-foe Ghidrah.

A detective of a decidedly different stripe takes on the case of “The Man-Made Solar Sphere.” This invention of Astro’s mentor Professor Elefen has been hijacked for destructive ends, and Inspector Randolph Holmes (supposedly the last in a long line of detectives, à la Lupin the 3rd) demands that the useful Astro serve only as his subordinate.

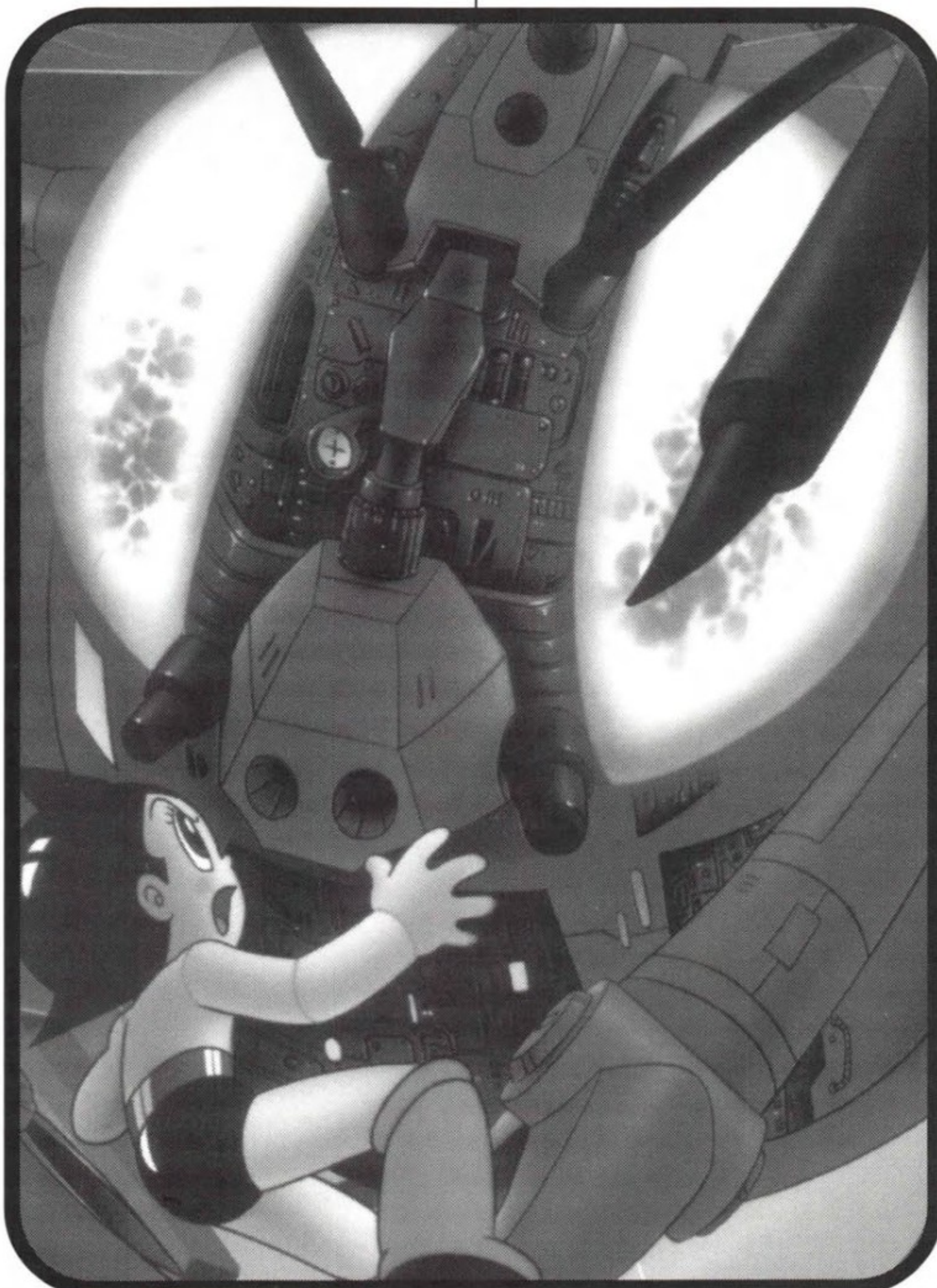
The inspector’s loathing of robots is soon explained—a past accident caused all of his body parts to be replaced with robotics—except his head!

Next, “Uran Falls in Love”... but not quite in the way the title would lead one to expect. The local robot population is being threatened by one of their own—however, Zeus the Destroyer is not acting under his own initiative. Why would Uran side with Zeus against her own brother? And how might her affection for Torch, a clumsy robot dog, tie in to the bigger picture?

Concluding **ASTRO BOY VOLUME 7** is “The Hijacked Airship.” Astro finds himself

humiliatingly disqualified from a school essay contest—as the subject is “dreams,” the boy robot is completely unable to grasp the concept. Rashly demanding to become more human by undergoing a procedure that will strip him of all his superpowers for a limited amount of time, Astro courts disaster as the crisis alluded to in the title takes place... but the “impossible dream” may yet save the day for both him and his opponent.

As **VOLUME 8** opens, Astro comes to the assistance of an archaeological expedition in “The Secret of the Mayas.” But no sooner does he arrive than he’s targeted for destruction by his



“fellow” robots—temple guardians under the control of the enigmatic Sphinx. The Sphinx has already claimed numerous human casualties—but under whose orders? And is the secret of the temple supernatural or scientific in nature? The human deaths take place more or less offscreen, but the demise of a live animal (an annoyingly recurrent element of the show) unfolds in plain view.

Possession of “The Anti-Proton Gun”—a superweapon capable of cracking the very moon in half—is at the heart of the next episode, which also sees the return of Astro’s long-dormant robotic nemesis, Atlas. The origin of this character had never been given a satisfying explanation (at least, not in this series)—his introductory episode made use of quick flashbacks and implied that he was at one time under the control of Skunk (though this story was left undetailed)—and his reappearance here is also taken for granted, with no mention of the trap in which he had previously been caught. Nevertheless, his long-withheld background is finally provided in the person of Walpurgis (!), his original creator (“Gis” for short). Gis plans to force Atlas to obtain the Anti-Proton Gun by holding his sister (and fellow Walpurgis creation) Livian hostage—Atlas reluctantly agrees, but keeps an eye on Gis via tachyon (he pronounces it “ta-kie-on”) technology. As was often the case by this stage of the series, Astro’s role is almost incidental here. The episode is highlighted by a painful sight gag in which the furious Captain Perot uses his sharp nose to peck a series of holes in the bulbous proboscis of Professor Elefen—and by a particularly violent finale.

Next up is “The Secret of Bee City,” one of Astro’s most outlandish adventures. Astro and Uran search for the missing Professor



McGowan, a renowned entomologist, on an island said to be inhabited by deadly, “man-eating” bees. In the company of McGowan’s son Christopher, the robotic siblings soon find themselves at odds with a bee-costumed madman intent on conquering the world with his robotic swarms. The megalomaniac’s identity comes as no surprise—but who’s controlling *him*?

“The Liar Robot” begins with a refresher course on the fable of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” before introducing the ironically-named True. Though the robots of this world are traditionally programmed for honesty, True was granted an exception—so that he could bolster the spirits of his creator’s blind daughter Pearl by reassuring her that her sight could one day be restored. The problem is that True lives on an island devoted to meteorological research—and he uses his ability to lie to spread a false rumor of an impending

cataclysmic earthquake. The populace, knowing only that the lie was started by a robot, mistakenly blame Astro—even going so far as to stone him! And naturally, the “real” disaster is on its way...

From Aesop to Shakespeare: “Robio and Robiette” gives us the rival clans of the Donahues and the Cavolets. Their respective robots are programmed to hate each other, but complications ensue when the protagonists of the title are pitted against each other in a high-stakes auto race. Remarkable (though unavoidably condensed) fidelity is shown to the source material (we’re even given a variation on the traditional balcony scene, while Robiette has a brother named “Kibalt”). Though it looks like the expected finale will be averted when Astro takes over for Robio in the race itself, the last 5m of this episode are about as violent as anything the Bard himself created.

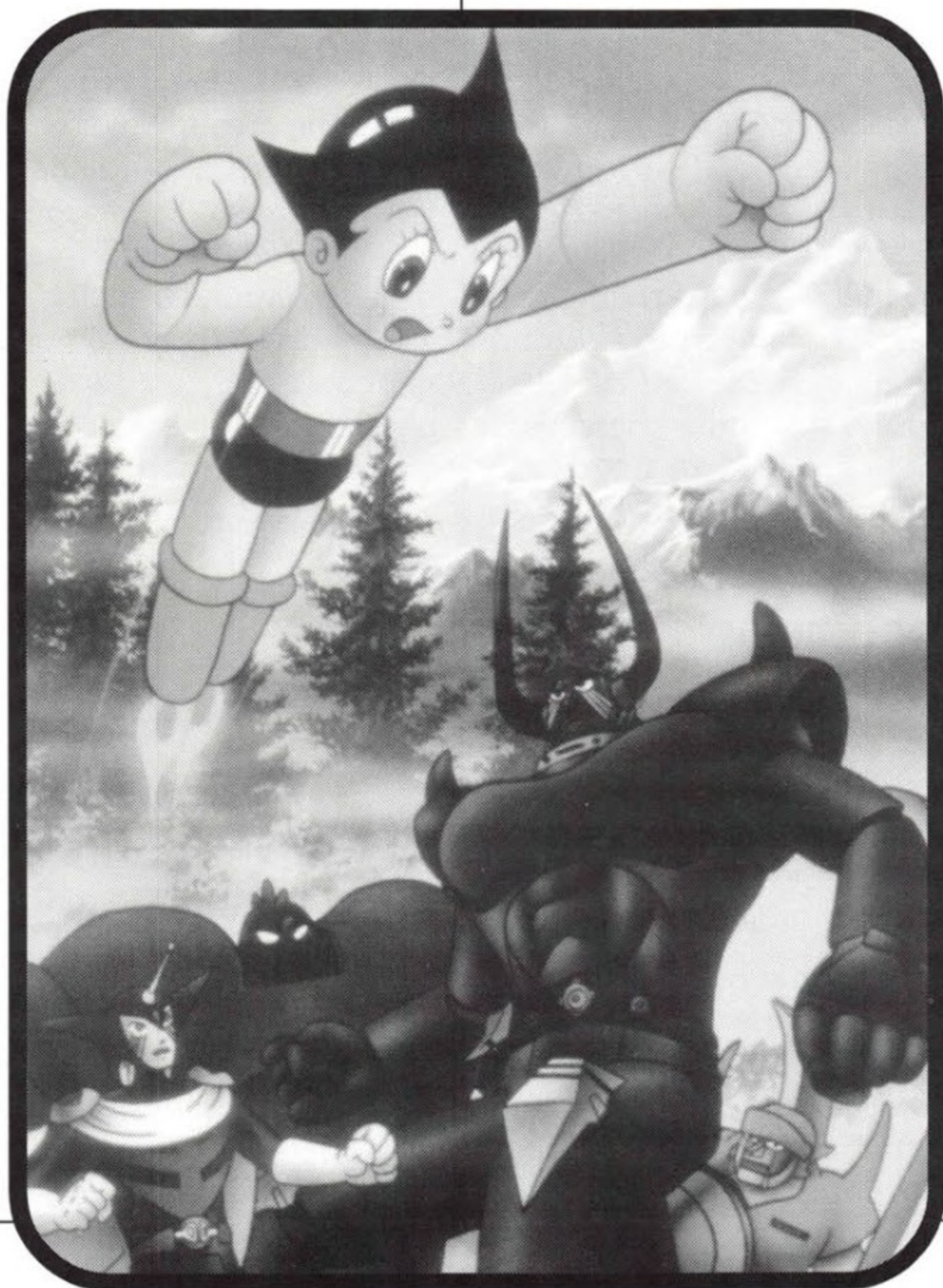
The mayhem continues in "Blackie Young," **VOLUME 8**'s concluding installment. When Professor Elefen receives a box of dismembered robot parts in the mail, the resulting investigation sends Astro and his teacher "Mr. Daddy Walrus" to the South Pole in pursuit of the title mobster. Blackie Young believes that robots were responsible for the death of his mother, so he and his masked gang have devoted themselves to their destruction in retaliation. Anti-robot prejudice runs rampant—Daddy Walrus is imprisoned for defending Astro, but uses his newly-revealed martial arts skills to his advantage. By the end of this episode, one human character is crushed (though, oddly, not fatally) by a stack of gold bricks, and Walrus is rigged to an electric chair set to activate once Astro opens the door to his cell!

As the series moves to its final set of episodes, it becomes clear that there will be no relief from the tone established in the previous outings. While the occasional comedic sequences remain, and while adult-level blood and gore is never a consideration, the various conflicts (involving both robots and humans) continue to rise in intensity, setting the stage for a potent two-part finale. But first up on **VOLUME 9** is "The Return of Queen Cleopatra," which seems to cry out for the two-part treatment itself. This episode begins in the middle of its action, as the series' latest would-be-conqueror attempts to subjugate the people of Egypt with a robotic Cleopatra, which he insists they accept as the real thing, sent back to them by the gods. Those who would oppose this ruler are in danger of being destroyed by a robot behemoth known as "Caesar." Despite

participating in an extremely rude sight gag in which he bursts out from the hindquarters of a bested enemy (proving that even the sight of a weapon being fired from his own rear end can be topped), Astro can do very little to affect the outcome here—not even his heroic theme music can lighten the mood of this episode's grisly, downbeat ending (which may have borrowed a page from Howard Hawks' **LAND OF THE PHAROHS**, 1955).

"Goliath's Head" belongs to a robot from Mars, whose craft has crash-landed on Earth. Professor Elefen rebuilds Goliath, powering it with an artificial brain machine, but deliberately withholds the head, realizing the danger it would present to the world if restored to full capacity. Unfortunately (and conveniently), Goliath has an extra pair of eyes in his chest, but that doesn't dissuade him from breaking free and proceeding to tear the head off of every robot he encounters in an effort to complete himself! It's highly unlikely that Astro can persuade Goliath to see the error of his ways, but he's determined to try...

The central rivalry of the series reaches its conclusion in "Atlas Forever." When explorer spacecraft are destroyed on Neptune and Uranus, Atlas is immediately blamed, and an Earth force led by one Captain Keeley (who lost a brother to Atlas), and armed with a powerful new weapon sets off to destroy him. But Atlas, for once, is innocent, and robot loyalty sends Astro to his unlikely defense. The true culprits are a race of aliens out to annihilate the Earth—and, thanks in part to the misguided anti-Atlas mission, they succeed in a devastating attack that destroys 70% of New York City. (One must make a special point of remembering that this show, though new to US viewers, was



created over two decades ago.) Earth's only hope lies in an alliance between Astro and Atlas—but the latter's contempt for the human race seems insurmountable. This riveting episode is certainly a tough act to follow, and perhaps its successor should have been slotted earlier.

In "The Death Balloon," which features a conflict more personal than global, Skunk—in association with a devious political candidate—sends Astro-shaped explosive balloons around the city in order to destroy the boy robot's reputation. Since the targets of these balloons are primarily schoolchildren, nobody actually dies as a result of the explosions, despite the title. Though Astro proves himself blameless in these situations, once again the townspeople fall for the rather obvious plot and start shouting for his head. Nothing new here.

But the series finale, "The Greatest Robot in the World," is a worthy climax. As Part 1 of this adventure commences, we meet the power-crazed Sultan and his mysterious, cloaked assistant Obra. The Sultan's creation, a warrior robot known as Bruton, is sent to destroy seven rivals to his supremacy. Astro is second on Bruton's hit list, but he's unaware of both the challenge and the fact that Uran is attempting to impersonate him and stand in his place. Bruton, who isn't fooled, refuses to kill Uran—but he takes her hostage to force Astro's hand. When Bruton is severely damaged in a bout with another contender, Astro's robot loyalty causes him to intervene rather than let him die. Gratitude only earns Astro a respite, however; the contest must continue. The use of robotic characters is once again used to justify levels of violence that would be otherwise unthinkable in a children's show; Bruton's opponents are

graphically dismembered, ripped in two down the middle, and so forth. (Part 2 makes it even worse by casting one of the victims as the beloved caretaker at a human orphanage!) Just when you think it's down to Bruton and Astro, Obra has yet another two-million-horsepower surprise in store... "The Greatest Robot in the World" is a suspenseful, slam-bang conclusion to the second ASTRO BOY series. **VOLUMES 7** and **8** each contain trailers for the episodes in the subsequent volume, while **VOLUME 9**, of course, has no such supplements.

While it's easy to understand—particularly in light of these final volumes—why the 1982 incarnation of ASTRO BOY was never picked up for American television, there is much more than a simple "children's show" to be found here, and animation fans should be quite pleased with Manga Video's high-quality tape releases of this long-unavailable program. As of this writing, a new, US-produced ASTRO BOY series is set to debut in 2004. Fans will be relieved to know that Tezuka Productions has a controlling interest in the program and has stated their intention to retain the character's integrity and ensure that Astro Boy is not turned into "a mindless automaton."

CROCODILE

1981, VCI Entertainment,
HF/LB, \$9.99, VHS
DD-2.0/LB/+, \$14.99,
DVD-1, 91m 30s

By John Charles

The huge success of **JAWS** spawned some pretty sorry imitations, but none worse than this Thai production, which received scattered stateside playdates through Herman Cohen's Cobra Media company. We have no

box-office figures to work from but one wonders whether this incompetently produced, mind-numbingly tedious picture lasted even a week in the theaters unfortunate enough to book it. A devastating storm that ravaged the coast of Thailand is followed by a far graver menace: a giant salt water crocodile. Although the creature seems content to munch on unwary swimmers, it soon progresses to wiping out entire villages with a flick of its tail. Scientists are eventually able to determine that the mutant is the result of atomic testing (how they came to that conclusion is never explained), but no weapons at the authorities' disposal are able to destroy the reptile.

Cobra Media's release carries a 1981 copyright date, but the fashions and cars suggest that this was likely produced a few years earlier. Between the beast's rampages (depicted via incredibly sorry miniatures and tight insert shots of real crocs, which make the creature's dimensions change from shot-to-shot), the viewer must suffer through soap-opera-styled dramatic interludes centered around a doctor, whose wife and child were among the first casualties. He now dedicates his life, Ahab-like, to destroying the croc. Director Sompote Sands (**THE 6 ULTRA BROTHERS VS. THE MONSTER ARMY**) makes a few feeble attempts at developing suspense, but it is impossible to generate much concern over events so murkily photographed and haphazardly edited. (On many occasions, hardly anything within the frame is discernible!) There is plenty of unconvincing bloodletting, but also an entirely gratuitous sequence showing the butchering of a live croc, so those wary of viewing such things are warned. A few derogatory laughs can be had from the tinker toy effects



We humbly invite you to supply your own "croc" caption for this shot from CROCODILE.

and clichéd dialogue but, overall, this is a leaden, irredeemable bore that will have general audiences scrambling for the "eject" button and tax the patience of the most undiscerning giant monster completists.

We first caught **CROCODILE** via Thorn-EMI's pan&scan tape release from the early '80s, which ranked among the worst video transfers of its time. Now we have VCI's new widescreen edition... which ranks among the worst video transfers of *its* time. Even after two viewings, it is difficult to tell what went wrong with the source materials. Was the film stock defective? Did the lab ruin the negative? Was Cohen sent a sub-standard negative by Dick Randall (who receives a co-producer credit)? The materials are consistently grainy and speckled and there is a strange, wavy jitter in the image throughout. Colors alternate between oversaturated and virtually non-existent, whites bloom, and night sequences are impenetrable.

Some prominent white dropouts even pop up in the master tape. The damage is further compounded by VCI's decision to squeezebox the scope image at 1.74:1, leaving everything looking even more distorted. On top of this, the company has deceptively listed "16:9 ratio" on the DVD packaging. Yes, 1.74 is close to the standard 16:9 ratio of 1.78, but this disc is *not* anamorphic, something that any customer seeing the designation "16:9" would automatically assume.

Dick Randall apparently arranged the English dubbing, as many of the usual Italian exploitation voice artists are heard; the audio track is thick and mildly distorted but coherent. Two radio spots are included on the DVD, but no trailer. However, we do receive trailers for **KISS OF THE TARANTULA**, **DON'T OPEN THE DOOR**, **THE TWILIGHT PEOPLE**, and **GORG0**—the highlights of the disc by default.

GLADIATORS 7

I sette gladiatori (Italian)

Los siete espartanos (Spanish)

"The Seven Gladiators"

1962, VCI Entertainment,

HF/LB, \$9.99, VHS

DD-2.0/LB/+, \$14.99,

DVD-0, 91m 44s

By John Charles

Although he is the son of the first emperor, gladiator Darius (Richard Harrison) keeps this fact a secret from his Roman captors and enters the arena for what will apparently be a death sentence. However, after defeating several opponents, Darius' life is spared and he is given his freedom. The warrior's return home to Sparta is shattered by the news that his father has been murdered, and Darius subsequently loses his sword when defending himself against an unprovoked attack. The weapon is used by the scheming Hiarba (**THE BLANCH EVILLE MONSTER**'s Gerard Tichy) to murder the father of Darius' childhood love, Aglaia



*Richard Harrison struggles to clear his name and rid Sparta of a venomous tyrant in the Italian/Spanish spectacle **GLADIATORS 7**.*

(**DJANGO**'s Loredana Nusciak), who is quick to believe Hiarba's claim that the gladiator was responsible. However, Darius is rescued by young Livius (Enrique Avila) and gathers a group of fellow Spartans (including **TEXAS ADIOS**' Livio Lorenzon and **WHITE COMMANCHE**'s Bernabe Barta Barri) who owe him their lives. Together, the men formulate a plan to eliminate Hiarba, but only after he has admitted his guilt to Aglaia.

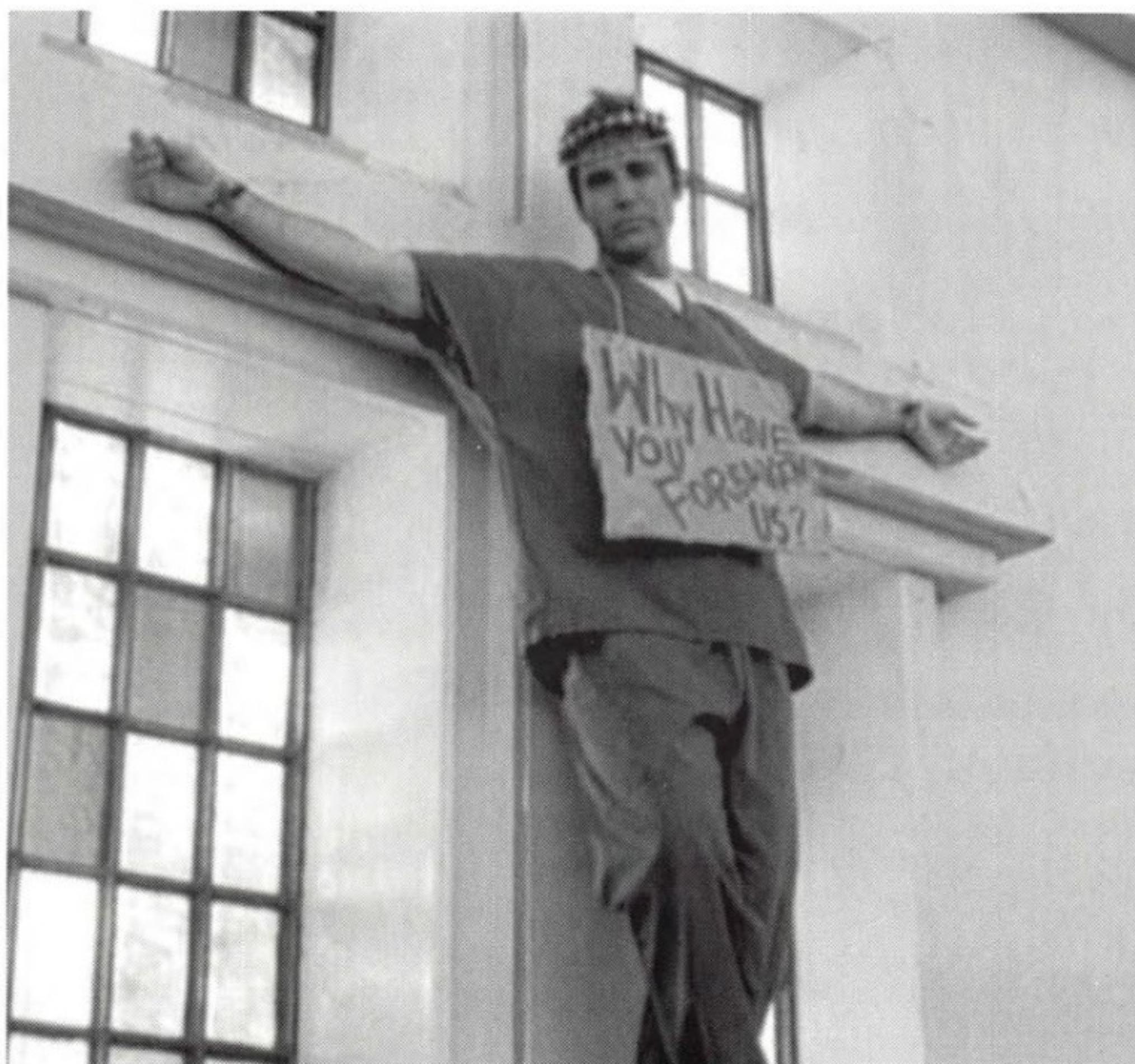
As suggested by the title, this is a *peplum* variation on the old **SEVEN SAMURAI** formula, with each of the fighters introduced in a vignette allowing them to demonstrate their unique abilities (arrows, knives, brute strength) and character traits (alcoholic, thief, rich man grown soft from a life of leisure, etc.). There is nothing especially distinguished about the production: Pedro Lazaga (**MURDER MANSION**) directs in workman-like fashion and neither the score nor the cinematography (which features some particularly bad day-for-night shots) are conspicuously flamboyant or

imaginative. However, as a rousing Grade B actioner, **GLADIATORS 7** offers sufficient amounts of jocular humor, swordplay, horseback charges, animal stampedes, and anonymous soldiers falling to their deaths from great heights to attain most of its unambitious goals. Those offended by violence against animals are warned that a bull is speared during one of the arena combat sequences.

GLADIATORS SEVEN (on-screen title) was handled stateside by MGM and their logo appears at the height of this edition. However, that company's rights to this Italian/Spanish co-production have apparently expired, given the number of tape and DVD versions on the market. VCI's non-anamorphic 2.30:1 presentation is largely satisfying. The splice line is visible whenever one shot cuts to another, hues are sometimes a bit off, and there is light wear throughout the 35mm source print. However, the image is generally sharp and sufficiently detailed and colorful; the audio has some surface noise but no seriously distracting faults. The

anamorphic process used in production is not mentioned in the credits but, judging from the bending at the edges of the screen, the picture was likely shot using an early CinemaScope lens.

The only extras on the DVD edition are theatrical trailers for **ANY GUN CAN PLAY** and **A BULLET FOR SANDOVAL**, plus video promo spots for **BLOOD AND BLACK LACE** and **THE WHIP AND THE BODY** (the latter, amazingly, mentions only "John M. Old"—no Mario Bava!). **GLADIATORS SEVEN** is also available as part of Brentwood's 2-disc **GLADIATORS** set and a comparison reveals the two presentations to be identical. This release retails for \$5 less than VCI's DVD and also includes Ferdinando Baldi's **DUEL OF THE CHAMPIONS**, Domenico Paolella's **REBEL GLADIATOR**, and a second Richard Harrison vehicle, Antonio Margheriti's **GIANTS OF ROME**. All are cropped and in less than optimal condition (particularly **REBEL**, which is derived from a B&W TV print), but still represent a more worthwhile purchase.



Jeff Fahey stars as Joe Spinelli—a moralistic, practical joking serial killer—in the surprisingly worthwhile DTV item, *MANIACTS*.

MANIACTS

2001, MTI Home Video,
HF/SS, \$89.95, VHS
DD-2.0/ST/+, \$24.95,
DVD-1, 93m 25s

By John Charles

Sentenced to Edgemare Institute for the Criminally Insane, child-like killer Joe Spinelli (Jeff Fahey) quickly learns that the staff and guards are more sadistic and base than the upper class dregs he dispatched, inflicting beatings and punishment on the inmates at the least provocation. Spinelli “keeps sane” by staging creative practical jokes (like a recreation of Christ’s crucifixion) that infuriate the personnel but earn him the respect of pretty young Beth (Kellie Waymire), the notorious “Hitch Killer.” The two develop a friendship based on their credo of slaughtering only the “right kind of people,” but their defiant behavior threatens the institution’s grant money. Joe

is ordered eliminated but, with the help of a sympathetic guard (Mel Winkler), he manages to escape. Unable to function in the real world, Joe breaks back into Edgemare and joins Beth in making sure that all the “right people” who tormented them come to a gruesome end. Once this is accomplished, the pair opt for a quiet existence in the countryside, where more ambassadors of the true evils of the world (real estate agents, reward hunters) have a nasty habit of trespassing. There is also the matter of Beth’s sincere belief that Queen Elizabeth is her biological mother, which motivates the couple to crash the festivities when Her Majesty visits Arizona’s London Bridge!

The premiere entry in MTI’s “Redrum Entertainment” line devoted to horror films, **MANIACTS** has some brief bits of gore (most memorably, a head being blasted in half by a high pressure fire

hose), and is cheerfully irresponsible in its sympathy for serial killers, but should not be confused with the generic psycho thriller suggested by the odd cover art. Writer/director C.W. Cressler has fashioned a fanciful, moderately enjoyable black comedy that works best in its second half, after the couple has put the asylum (and the obvious jests about corrupt correctional systems) behind them. The unorthodox casting of handsome DTV tough guy Fahey as a virginal mama’s boy murderer is largely successful, and Cressler thankfully defies a few expectations (Joe’s meeting with a mouthy prostitute does *not* result in him murdering her). The film is at its best when concentrating on the couple and their pronounced quirks, like Beth’s Jackie Kennedy-like ensemble, with her dainty hat not quite concealing the vivid electro shock therapy burns on her forehead. Russ Meyer regular John Furlong is surprisingly affecting as a crusty and psychic old farmer who, having sensed that the couple was coming, welcomes them into his lonely life. Speaking of ESP, you probably deduced from the name of Fahey’s character that **MANIACTS** ends with a dedication to Joe “Maniac” Spinell, the colorful, New York-based character actor who would have been a perfect choice for the lead here.

The standard transfer is oversaturated and quite grainy in spots, but reasonably detailed and symmetrically composed. The stereo mix is basic and uninteresting, with a weak dialogue track. Our DVD screener had no chapters and no extras, other than a trailer; street copies will reportedly also include Spanish subtitles, cast bios and additional previews. A Spanish subbed VHS version is also available. 



The Film Bulletin Reviews, 1969-1974

THE GIRL GRABBERS

Crude, inept sexploiter delivers the goods for the indiscriminating voyeur markets. Where sex, per se, draws, this will attract good grosses. No Rating.

With a great title like **THE GIRL GRABBERS**, this sordid sex entry didn't have to be any good—and it isn't—to rack up pretty good grosses from the indiscriminating voyeur crowd—which it will. Plenty of bouncing breasts and simulated passion assure the unrated but X-worthy RAF Industries release of a big reception in its intended market, despite the fact that, technically, it is little better than a home movie. The women are homely and rather aged for their roles, but the regular appearance of screen-filling close shots of various heaving bosoms, many apparently fortified with silicone, will make up for a lot among the pant-and-grunt set. Simon Nuchtern's script, production, and directional talent can be described respectively as moronic, inept and non-existent. Much of the dialogue has a stupefyingly improvised early Warhol quality, and is about as interesting. The New York-located photography is amateurish throughout, with blatant exposure errors, while the music score is a medley of favorite canned TV commercial themes.

Scruffy John Spence and slack-jawed idiot Sebastian Dangerfield (who stars under the name "Stefen Peters" in RAF's **TO HEX WITH**

SEX) play two hippie hoods who rape chunky, buxom Ludmilla Tchor in her apartment, incurring the wrath of her square boyfriend, Paul Cox. Following a lead to a warehouse run by a lesbian madame, Cox beds down with Spence's over-the-hill girlfriend, Jackie Richards, who characterizes Spence as "a pimp... and, for fun, he kills people." Some offscreen cunnilingus ensues, accompanied on the track by a loop of munching noises, followed by an intercourse scene with much agonized moaning, also on a loop. Finally, Cox and Miss Tchor are captured and tied to chairs in a garage, which fronts for a dope peddling operation, as the insatiable Miss Richards doffs her clothes and tries to arouse Cox while Spence tries to make it with the unhappy Miss Tchor. "Oh no, not again!" she cries, understandably enough. Although not much can happen with both protagonists tied to chairs, the scene goes on endlessly. Spence and Dangerfield are instructed by a superior to kill the captives in the woods, only "don't hack 'em up too bad." Cox and Miss Tchor are able to convince Miss Richards to help them, especially after she hears she's going to be killed, too. In the woods, the three of them get the drop on the girl grabbers; Dangerfield and Miss Richards are shot and Spence gets run over. This scene, like those preceding it, is poorly staged beyond belief.

1968. RAF Industries (An August Films Inc. Production). Color by Eastman Kodak. 83 minutes. Produced and directed by Simon Nuchtern.



Godzilla and homely offspring Minya pommel "an ugly arachnid" with radioactive rays 'n' rings in GODZILLA'S REVENGE.

GODZILLA'S REVENGE

Monsters fight, but it's all a dream in this mild Japanese kiddie film. Good for matinees and family drive-ins. Title will lure some business in regular horror markets. Rated G.

Its product having lapsed into childishness of late, Japan's Toho monster factory has seemingly decided to aim directly at the tiny tot market with **GODZILLA'S REVENGE**. Not only doesn't the scaly star wreak any revenge, he doesn't even show up for real: he and the usual prehistoric supporting cast exist only as characters in a little boy's dream. Some of the low-comic gymnastics of the rubber-suited stunt men who play the lovable monsters are mildly amusing, and youngsters will respond to the moppet hero, making this a good prospect for family drive-ins and weekend matinees. However, the general horror and action trades attracted by the title will be annoyed at the kiddie tone of the proceedings.

A cute little Japanese tyke who gets picked on by big kids dreams he's a friend of homely little Godzilla, Jr., who snorts smoke rings and talks (!) like Mortimer Snerd. On Monster Island, a sort of

retirement home for Toho contractees, they watch the old man rough it up with the likes of a giant crayfish, an ugly arachnid, a feathered something-or-other and a red-haired whatzit that keeps picking on Junior—all this in footage largely lifted from previous pictures. Godzilla's dragon breath vaporizes all comers, and by stepping on his son's tail, the resourceful parent gets him to emit scorching breath of his own, thereby vanquishing his nemesis. The beneficial example of the monster's innate pluck and affectionate home life (Godzilla appears to be, alas, a widower) enables the young hero to outwit some comical kidnappers and teach the local bully a lesson. Several venerable Toho personalities (plastic snakes, hairy bugs, leaping lizards, etc., each with its own indecipherable name) make token appearances, but it's the bland real-life footage that comprises most of the brief running time.

Gojira-Minira-Gabara: Oru kaijû daishingeki. 1969. UPA-Maroon Films (Toho Productions). Eastman Color, TohoScope. 72 minutes. Kenji Sahara, Machiko Naka, Temonen [Tomonori] Yazaki. Produced by Tomoyuki Tanaka. Directed by Ishiro Honda.

Presently available on VHS and DVD from Simitar Entertainment, the latter a two-sided disc with both standard and widescreen transfers.

HEAVY TRAFFIC

Animated cartoon about New York slum life is definitely in that offbeat, anti-Establishment vein that will amuse the youth crowd and the pseudo-sophisticates. Loaded with some crude scatological stuff that won it an X rating, it should draw quite well in urban and drive-in markets, and might just prove titillating enough to attract a fair number of suburbanites. Not for the more conventional, prim markets. Rated X.

HEAVY TRAFFIC is an animated cartoon feature about a virginal young cartoonist's involvements with his black hooker girlfriend, his genital-cleaving Jewish mother, his bigoted Italian father and assorted pimps, drag queens, prostitutes, mobsters and murderers of varying races and creeds. Although it is bound to be condemned in some quarters as simply "pornographic," it is obvious that producer Steve Krantz and writer-director Ralph Bakshi were attempting a serious treatment of what passes for life in the more squalid environs of New York City, and it will attract the youth audience. The more vulgar and sophomoric elements get the upper hand right away and keep it, turning the AIP release into a repetitious mélange of seamy situations and hip hysteria.

Underground-oriented audiences who responded to Krantz and Bakshi's earlier **FRITZ THE CAT**, including the more mature pseudo-sophisticates, will find its ersatz head-comix aura sufficiently amusing to justify a visit. General audiences in more conventional markets are likely to be appalled at its seeming effort to offend as many people as possible, and although its content is mild by live-action pornographic standards, censorship trouble in some areas is not inconceivable in view of the recent high court ruling. Although **FRITZ THE CAT** was widely criticized as a debasement of the Robert Crumb character, it had sufficient style and wit to be amusing. In contrast, **HEAVY TRAFFIC**'s humanoid characters are uninterestingly designed (the hero is drawn to resemble Bakshi, but the others are all grotesques), the voice characterizations are less than memorable and the music score is a huge letdown (Sergio Mendes and Brasil '77's rendition of "Scarborough Fair" makes a strikingly inappropriate theme song).

The only consistently effective aspect is the atmospheric blend of up-front animation with photographic and filmed backgrounds of

New York—though, for some reason, all the film clips of Broadway are vintage 1948. Some of the more surrealistic passages are nice (such as a pencil-sketch animation set to Chuck Berry's "Maybelline"), and there is a lovely bit in which the characters are animated into an Edward Hopper streetscape. One of the more blatant digressions is a parodic retelling of the Messiah story in which a massive pile of garbage is worshipped as God. God's son ends up killing him on the grounds that "My Father has been conning us all these years." In the end, the gangster father puts out a contract for the son's death and our hero (named Michael Corleone) is shot in the head in animated s-l-o-o-w motion... but it's all a fantasy imagined by Michael as he plays pinball (by now a rather worn metaphor for life).

Joseph Kaufman and Beverly Hope Atkinson, who supply the voices for Michael and his girlfriend, are seen in a tepid live-action sequence that comprises the final few minutes. Frank DeKova, Terri Haven, Mary Dean Lauria, Jacqueline Mills and Lillian Adams provide voices for other characters. The Deluxe Color processing is unusually bright.

1973. American International (Steve Krantz Productions). Deluxe Color. 78 minutes. Produced by Steve Krantz. Directed by Ralph Bakshi.

***HEAVY TRAFFIC** is available on VHS and DVD from MGM Home Entertainment, priced at \$14.95. It is closed-captioned but has no supplementary materials.*

KLUTE

Strong performance by Jane Fonda lifts this tough, fast suspense drama about a cop and a call girl on a New York manhunt to superior entertainment level. OK for discriminating audiences as well as ballyhoo markets. Rated R.

Jane Fonda gives the performance of her life as a vulnerable call girl menaced by a voice from her past in **KLUTE**, a well-made and generally intelligent suspense entry which figures to perform fairly well on the strength of word-of-mouth about the star's work, which is more Oscar-worthy than her celebrated job in **THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY?** With Donald Sutherland co-starred in the title role, the Warner Bros. release should have drawing power for the important youth trade, but resistance on the part of some more conservative patrons toward Miss Fonda's political activism may cut into the wide

audience the film deserves. Numerous exploitation angles make it a healthy ballyhoo and drive-in prospect, as well.

As a part-time unsuccessful model and full-time very successful whore-without-a-heart-of-gold, Fonda exhibits a range and depth which should disarm and surprise her detractors, and helps transform what could have been a routine crime saga into an engrossing and even thought-provoking drama. Sutherland eschews his usual flamboyant mannerisms and underplays his role as a square cop from suburbia who teams up with Fonda to find a friend who disappeared in New York. Serving mostly as a quiet foil for her emoting, his strong, somewhat naïve presence is the perfect complement to her scared, know-it-all bravado. Director Alan J. Pakula has elicited several other good performances, notably from Charles Cioffi as the killer, whose identity is revealed midway, and Roy Scheider as Fonda's ex-boyfriend and pimp. Pakula tries, with some success, to give the material some added meaning by making New York itself seem guilty. Photographer Gordon Willis provides numerous alienating shots of characters reflected in or silhouetted against oversized windows and antiseptic buildings. A sleazy subculture of hookers, johns, sadists and junkies adds local color, but none of this ever becomes lurid.

Andy and Dave Lewis' credible script has Fonda, whose profession enables her to control her relationships, thrown off-balance by an obscene phone caller and a shadowy pursuer who kills two of her street-walking colleagues. Believing her to be in the know about his missing friend, Sutherland gets close enough to her for a tentative romance to develop, the progress and eventual dissolution of which is presented with perception and realism. After a search

through some of the seamiest haunts in the city and a couple of harrowing narrow escapes, Cioffi traps Fonda in a darkened, deserted garment district warehouse. Just as he's about to kill her, Sutherland shows up and Cioffi falls to his death from a window—in slow motion. This contrived climax is the one serious flaw in a picture which is adult in the most responsible sense of the word. Michael Small's music score is heavy on eerie fright effects, most of which work.

1971. Warner Bros. Panavision. Technicolor. 114 minutes. Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland. Produced by Alan J. Pakula and David Lange. Directed by Alan J. Pakula.

*True to Joe's word, Jane Fonda won an Academy Award for her performance as Bree Daniels in this picture. One of the worst widescreen movies to try to watch on television, cable or otherwise, the only way to **KLUTE**—short of a theatrical revival—is Warner Home Video's DVD (\$19.98), which is 16:9 enhanced and closed-captioned, and includes a promotional production short and theatrical trailers.*

Jane Fonda allures Donald Sutherland in her Oscar-winning performance as a call girl stalked by a sadistic killer in KLUTE.



THE MEPHISTO WALTZ

Modern witchcraft horror film in the **ROSEMARY'S BABY** vein has femme appeal, exploitable angles for mass markets to offset slow start, slack direction. Strong sell should produce above-average response. Rated R.

Audiences who were attracted to **ROSEMARY'S BABY** by the elements of modern witchcraft, sex and suspense will find similar lures in **THE MEPHISTO WALTZ**, an occult horror exercise with built-in *femme* appeal. The well-produced 20th Century-Fox release features enough exploitable aspects to flesh-out the enticing ballyhoo campaign it will require to realize its above-average potential for the mass markets.

Spunky, plain-talking Jacqueline Bisset is pitted against a crowd of creepy sophisticated types who dig classical music, worship the devil and are hungering for the immortal soul—not to mention the mortal body—of her ex-pianist husband Alan Alda. The major problem in the development of this basically viable premise, and one which may limit word-of-mouth, is that Ben Maddow's screenplay from Fred Mustard Stewart's novel is long on exposition and short on thrills, so that events don't seem to get moving until the second half. There are a couple of nearly chilling moments along the way (mostly involving a large, toothy dog), as well as some nudity and incest overtones, but the more obviously scary portions rely entirely on wide-angle distortion lenses with vaselined edges for their fright effects. Hollywoodites Alda and Bisset become involved with Curt Jurgens, "the world's greatest pianist," and his weirdo daughter Barbara Parkins, both of whom encourage Alda to revive his music career. Bisset doesn't go for their decadent, orgiastic influence and is suspicious of the big money Jurgens leaves to Alda when he dies. Alda then undergoes a classic horror film transformation, assuming Jurgens' talent and ruthless personality. Having dreamed that Jurgens performed a weird rite on her young daughter, Miss Bisset is terrified when the child actually dies soon after from an unknown disease. Miss Parkins' ex-husband Bradford Dillman spills the beans to Bisset about Jurgens' incestuous relationship with Parkins and their suspicious ritual activities. Then he, too, dies mysteriously. Injured in a car accident, Bisset makes her own pact with Satan and kills Parkins, then herself. The ending, which is supposed to indicate that Bisset has inhabited

Parkins' body in order to repossess her possessed husband, is more confusing than chilling.

Paul Wendkos, lately an action specialist, handles the direction in routinely competent fashion, allowing the pace to lag whereas some of the visual gimmickry he brought to a similar telefeature, **FEAR NO MORE**, would have given the material a helpful lift. Bisset dominates the film with a smoothly sympathetic portrayal, contrasted with Alda's and Parkins' somewhat deadpan emoting. Jurgens wheezes and rolls his eyes in fun-to-watch Akim Tamiroff fashion, and Dillman creates a likeable character out of a wispy role. William Windom and Kathleen Widdoes have little impact in functional family friend parts and Pamelyn Ferdin is obnoxiously precious as the little girl. Photographer William Spence manages a few nice tricky shots in clock pendulums and up stairwells, and Jerry Goldsmith's score is okay.

1971. 20th Century-Fox (Quinn Martin Productions). DeLuxe Color. 115 minutes, Jacqueline Bisset, Alan Alda, Barbara Parkins, Curt Jurgens. Produced by Quinn Martin. Directed by Paul Wendkos.

THE MEPHISTO WALTZ is available from 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, on VHS only, priced at \$29.98.

SKULLDUGGERY

Offbeat adventure fantasy can't decide between spoof and serious satire. "Missing Link" aspects could attract interest, if strongly exploited, but prospects are that poor title and no-sell will relegate to lower slot on dual bills. OK for action fans, kiddies. Rated GP.

Owing to the presence of some extraordinary furry creatures called Tropis, representing the fabled "missing link," portions of **SKULLDUGGERY** capture the imagination. But, for the most part, this offbeat, badly titled Universal release doesn't live up to the potential of its material. Though it might engender some favorable response from the youth segment and others looking for "something different," it seems destined to get lost on the lower half of dual bills where it will prove satisfying to action fans and the kiddies. Production difficulties, which reportedly included a switch in directors, have resulted in a curiously uneven adventure which intersperses moments of impact between long, fuzzy second-unit panoramas of paddling down the river and trekking through the jungle. The script by Nelson Gidding (**THE HAUNTING**), based very loosely on a French novel by Vercors



The Tropis, the loveable "missing links" exploited culturally, sexually, and murderously by "civilized man" in SKULLDUGGERY.

(real name: Jean-Marc Bruller) published here as *THE MURDER OF THE MISSING LINK*, has enough plot angles for three movies. It offers intriguing possibilities for fascinating filmmaking—and parts of the film are just that, but Gordon Douglas' regrettably haphazard direction makes a hodge-podge of the various story elements, producing a highly disjointed mood of uneasy fantasy which at times seems like a spoof of jungle movies, while at others leans toward dramatic satire on the nature of man. In sum, the film is neither.

Rugged Burt Reynolds and middle-aged tippler Roger C. Carmel are two charming adventurer types hoping to locate rare phosphors. They ingratiate their way into a New Guinea expedition led by anthropologist Susan Clark and her missionary father, Chips Rafferty. Following a great deal of standard jungle situations and romantic interest, they encounter the Tropis, diminutive, fur-covered humanoid creatures played with affecting naturalness by 24

students from the University of Djakarta, no less, and the film's one major success (as well as a natural ballyhoo peg). In a beautifully played scene, Carmel gains their confidence with canned ham, and earns the devotion of a lady Tropi which he names Topazia, a role played by Pat Suzuki, whose performance is nothing short of marvelous. They find the Tropis of nearly human intelligence and sunny disposition, and missionary Rafferty begins to wonder if indeed they may really be human. German Paul Hubschmid, who financed the expedition, forms a partnership with Reynolds and Carmel to mine the phosphors, using the Tropis as willing labor—although his real aim is to selectively breed the creatures to produce millions of slave laborers for his mines around the world. Upset over both Hubschmid's plan and his interest in Miss Clark, Reynolds is revolted to find the native bearers roasting the Tropis for food, and smuggles Topazia out by helicopter with Carmel. He intends to prove Topazia human by interbreeding her with a human being, but Carmel confesses she is already pregnant—by him. She delivers a stillborn child, and a doctor is tricked into signing a death certificate certifying it as human. To provoke a sensational world-shaking trial, Reynolds confesses to smothering the child, and the film grinds into a polemical courtroom segment, with a masterful bit by Wilfred Hyde-White as a racist Rhodesian doctor using the trial to prove that black people are sub-human. After a tentative stab at philosophical issues, an angry advocate of Black Power is introduced and has the caged, terrified Topazia brought in as evidence, but in the confusion she escapes and is accidentally killed. "I didn't want this to happen," the militant says. "I love animals." From this point, the picture progresses to a lame ending in the form of a sermon by the judge, and no verdict is announced.

In terms of characterization, the humans are as fuzzy as the Tropis, but less interesting. An exception is Carmel, who gets the most from his rather bizarre role. Reynolds is a fairly stock hero type despite some funny lines, and Miss Clark has seldom looked better. Alexander Knox, Rhys Williams and Michael St. Clair have routine supporting roles. Robert Moreno's photography is variable and occasionally dark, while Oliver Nelson's familiar jungle music is acceptable.

1970. Universal. Technicolor, Panavision. 105 minutes. Burt Reynolds, Susan Clark, Roger C. Carmel. Directed by Gordon Douglas.

SKULLDUGGERY, which was partially reshot and re-edited to eliminate views of the Tropi females' nipples in an effort to avoid an R rating, still awaits its home video debut. 🐾

From the time of their initial release, the four horror films directed by Gordon Hessler for American International Pictures between 1969 and 1972—**THE OBLONG BOX** (1969), **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** (1970), **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** (1971) and **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** (1972)—have been unjustly criticized, misunderstood and disregarded by genre devotees. The reasons for this are numerous, beginning with the fact that three of the four movies represent the final chapter of AIP's long-running Edgar Allan Poe series. Despite the continued presence of Vincent Price, they could not be further removed from the style of the Roger Corman films which launched the franchise a decade earlier. If they do not stack up, this is less the fault of Hessler than of AIP itself, which lost its feel for Poe when Corman severed his relationship with the company. There is precious little Poe in **THE OBLONG BOX** and **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**, and in the case of **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**, no one bothered to open a Collected Works of Poe long enough to purloin a title from one of his stories or poems.

Furthermore, the Hessler films seemed anticlimactic in the wake of the triumphantly dark **WITCHFINDER GENERAL** (which AIP had successfully released under the ersatz Poe title **THE CONQUEROR WORM**, 1968) and the premature death of its talented young director, Michael Reeves. While Reeves' three-picture filmography repeatedly chronicles a battle between young and old to tell a story of innocence lost, culminating in a mature statement that climaxes in a resounding scream of despair, Hessler's films speak from a pit of disillusionment—which may have been the next logical step, but, to an audience, is not so pleasant or romantic a place to spend 90 minutes on the edge of one's seat.

Hessler's work was also assailed by the sort of production problems that Reeves, lucky lad, never had to encounter. Hessler—who had been an associate producer and producer for the ALFRED

HITCHCOCK PRESENTS and ALFRED HITCHCOCK HOUR television series—not only directed his films, but produced them as well. In most cases, his projects were pushed in front of the cameras before their scripts were quite finished, necessitating ongoing rethinks and rewrites throughout production. Further difficulties were imposed upon him by AIP's rigid control over casting (he was basically required to work with whomever had starred in a recent AIP hit), their deteriorating relationship with the increasingly dissatisfied Vincent Price, and complicated international co-production agreements—particularly true of **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**, which was lensed under unaccustomed circumstances in Toledo, Spain.

Yet another factor working against Hessler's popular acceptance was the fact that he was perhaps the most experimental filmmaker under contract to AIP since Curtis Harrington (**QUEEN OF BLOOD**, 1966), and working at a time when the hothouse environment of the late 1960s seemed to encourage a Dionysian abandon to all manner of cinematic excess in matters of violence, eroticism and technique. Teamed with an equally daring young screenwriter, the FILMS AND FILMING critic Christopher Wicking, Hessler made horror films that were so *avant garde*, even when telling stories set in centuries past, that AIP couldn't resist interfering with them editorially, and the resulting hodge-podges frequently left his and Wicking's original intentions maddeningly vague. After witnessing the ways in which AIP had butchered his ambitious, recursive take on **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**, Hessler tried to reason with the company but, finding them inflexible, resolved not to renew his contract. With that decision, AIP's most successful franchise came to an end.

Despite the compromises that Hessler was made to suffer in all facets of production, the essential personality of his work remained more or less discernible. On occasion, eloquent voices were raised in his defense, including that of British critic David Pirie, whose influential book *A HERITAGE OF HORROR: THE ENGLISH GOTHIC CINEMA 1946-1972* commended Hessler's "audacious technique, evolved in documentary and newsreel work, [which] resulted in a camera-style which probed his characters and sets as though they were under some kind of visual interrogation." (p. 157)

**THE OBLONG BOX /
SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**

1969/1970, MGM Home Entertainment,
DD-2.0/16:9/LB/CC/+, \$14.98, 96m 1s/94m 13s, DVD-1

**CRY OF THE BANSHEE /
MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**

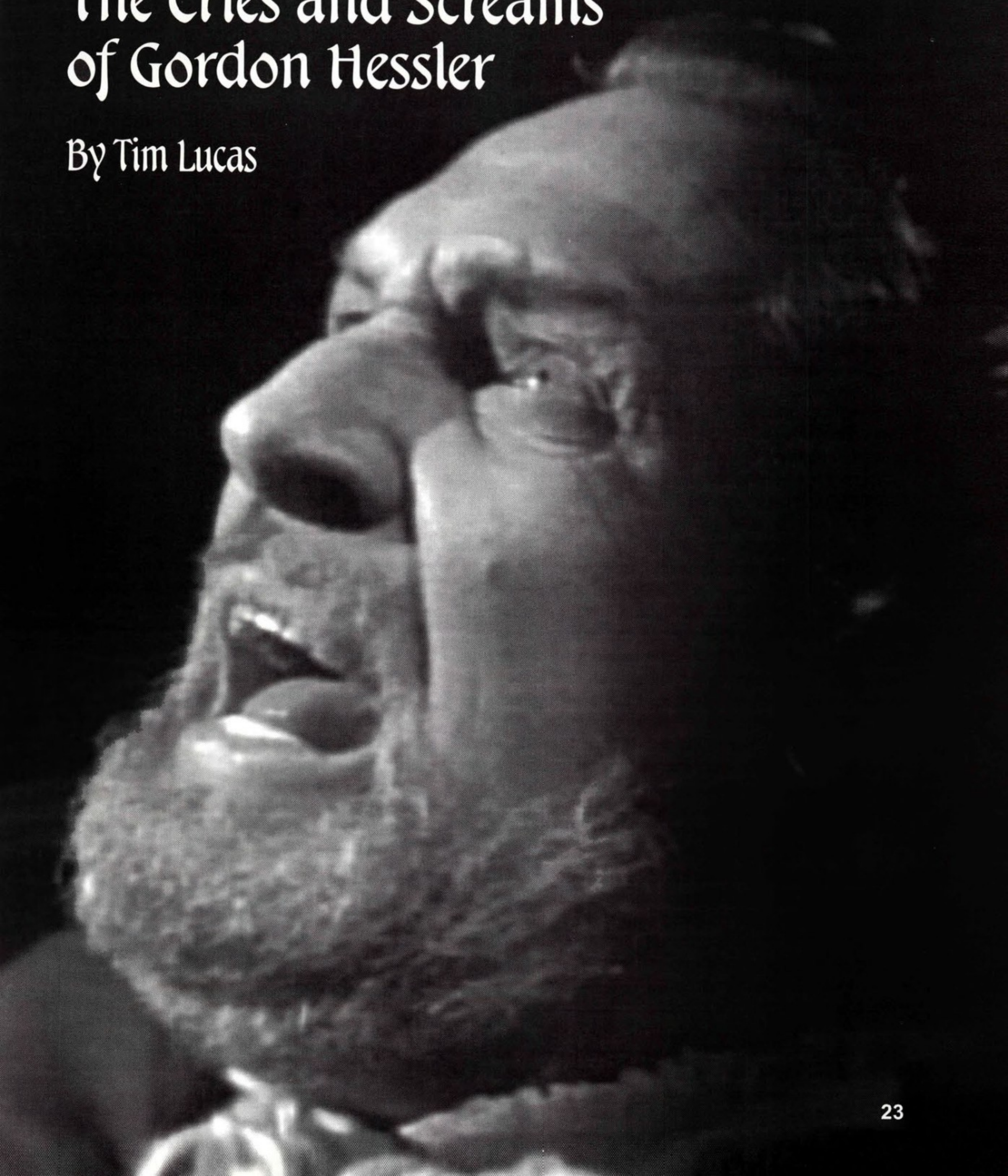
1971/1972, MGM Home Entertainment, DD-2.0/
16:9/LB/CC/+, \$14.98, 91m 9s/98m 26s, DVD-1

Vincent Price, not knowing whether to scream or laugh as he sees another generation of his family damned in CRY OF THE BANSHEE.

ALP and Pillage

The Cries and Screams
of Gordon Hessler

By Tim Lucas



Though AIP is rumored to have habitually destroyed the original negatives of films they recut for distribution in America and other English-speaking territories, at least in their early years, this was apparently not true of Hessler's work. When MGM Home Entertainment scheduled the Hessler films for digital restoration in 2000, they discovered that more than one version of most of the titles had been archived. And yet, MGM seems to have been completely unaware that the version of **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** they restored was Hessler's long-lost, never-before-publicly-screened director's cut—until a February 9, 2002 posting by Morgan Alexander on the Mobius Home Video Forum (www.mhvf.net) announced that the Encore Mystery Channel was airing this long-lost edition... literally without fanfare.

A few days later, I was able to see a repeat broadcast of the restored **MURDERS**. It left me beside myself with curiosity about whether or not Hessler himself was aware of what had happened. On February 13, 2002, I succeeded in tracking down the director by telephone and telling him the good news: that the version he made—the version he then considered to be the best film he had ever directed, the version which had been suppressed by AIP for more than three decades—was now being shown on cable television. Hessler was so shocked by the news, he almost couldn't accept it. He kept asking me, "But how do you know it was *my* version?"

"It's eleven minutes longer, it has no color tinting and it has a different ending."

"B-But how could this be? Where did they find the materials?"

I finally described enough of what I had seen to halfway convince him, but I sensed that he had been so hurt by AIP's thwarting of his original vision—which, at the time, had provoked a 7-8 page letter to AIP's Samuel Z. Arkoff which effectively ended their working relationship—that he literally couldn't permit himself to believe that his version had survived and prevailed... until he could see the proof with his own eyes. I notified MGM of the situation and tapes of the restored **MURDERS** and **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** (which had been quietly issued on VHS in the 1990s by Orion Home Video) were promptly delivered to Hessler. After so many years of reading Hessler's sad comments in interviews about how his films had been gutted by AIP, it was a great pleasure to be the one to bring him the glad tidings that, after 30 years, art had won out over commerce.

And so it is now with all four of Gordon Hessler's AIP films, which are now available for viewing in their intended form on two double-feature "Midnite Movies" DVDs from MGM Home Entertainment, and are thus ripe for reappraisal. While the films continue to

evinced some rough edges, mostly due to their aforementioned circumstances of production, to watch them is better understood their particular contribution to the history of horror cinema, which was then in the midst of its most turbulent metamorphosis. And to watch them in consecutive order is to witness the evolution of a steadily maturing craftsman whose willingness to play with form and narrative in new and innovative ways shows an unsuspected affinity with such contemporaries as Alain Resnais and Nicolas Roeg.

In three of Hessler's films, we can see traditional gothic horror struggling to survive in the years following the bitterly holocaustic visions of such films as **WITCHFINDER GENERAL** and **NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD** (both 1968)—and doing so in a decidedly more confrontational, less romantic way than Hammer Films had chosen to cope with the same realities. In the case of the science-fiction-oriented **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**—which is considered by many to be Hessler's masterpiece—the director can be seen working in the same *milieux* as Reeves' **THE SORCERERS** (1967), but with greater success—making the atmosphere more cynical and sinister by politicizing the intergenerational tensions which Reeves had depicted as secular, and by somehow pointing out that this new wave of cinematic science fiction was actually part of a cinematic tradition that reached all the way back to Fritz Lang. I say "somehow" because Hessler himself had never seen a Lang film at the time; nevertheless, Lang himself became one of **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**'s most vocal admirers.

While it is generally known that the original cuts of Hessler's films contained more blood and nudity, the full extent of AIP's interference with his work has remained undetailed till now. With the director's cuts now readily available, the adversities suffered by these films may seem like so much water under the bridge, but it's important to drag those waters to understand the popular and critical reception these films received, and to relate yet another chapter in the never-ending story of daring artistic expression at odds with cautious commercial enterprise.

Gordon Hessler first joined AIP as a line producer for their epic international co-production **DE SADE** (1969). One wonders if he might have been hired by AIP in a slippery attempt to meet **DE SADE**'s quota obligations as a US/German co-production, because Hessler, though raised and educated in England, had been born (on December 12, 1930) in Berlin, Germany. Through no fault of his

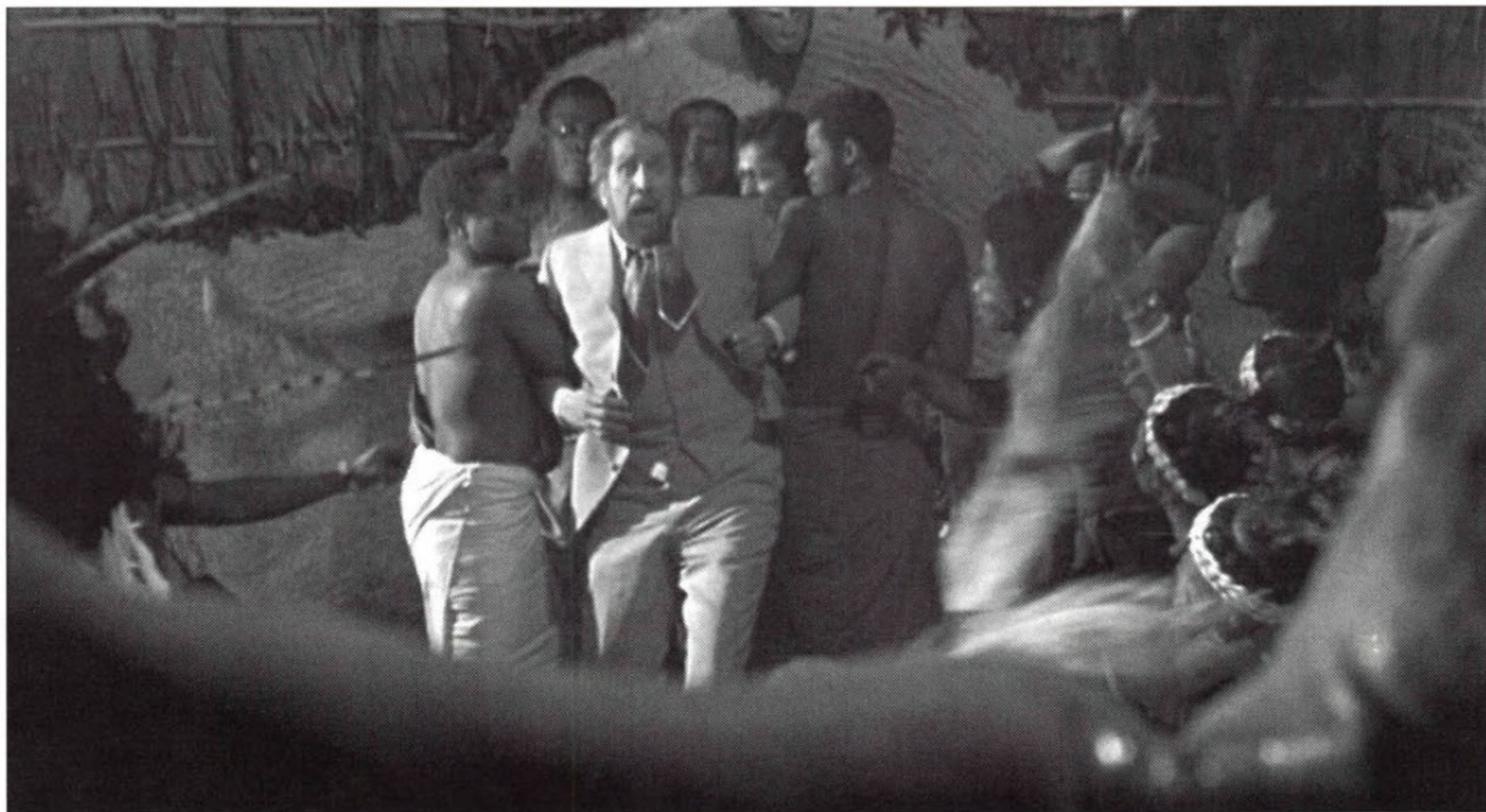
own, he was soon removed from that production and given the "consolation prize" of producing AIP's next Poe picture, **THE OBLONG BOX**. After meeting only a few times with its assigned director, the emotionally troubled Michael Reeves (also a **DE SADE** reject), Hessler was catapulted into the director's chair when, on February 11, 1969, Reeves was found dead in his apartment from a combination of alcohol and barbiturates at the age of 25.

Filmed at Shepperton Studios in England, **THE OBLONG BOX** is probably the best-known of Hessler's AIP films, as it was the first film to co-star Vincent Price and Christopher Lee. Almost as importantly, it also shows signs of taking up the baton from the fallen Reeves by reuniting Price with his co-stars from **WITCHFINDER GENERAL**, Hilary Dwyer and Rupert Davies.

The film opens in Africa, where Julian Markham (Price) is attracted by native drums to a voodoo ceremony where a vengeful tribe has crucified his brother Edward (Alister Williamson) and placed a curse upon him. Some time later, back at the Markham estate in England, the now-knighted Sir Julian and his manservant Ruddock (Michael Balfour) cope with the violent Sir Edward, who has survived but must be kept chained in a remote room as his face and sanity disintegrate under penalty of magic. With the assistance of Trench (Peter Arne), his associate Mark Norton (Carl Rigg) and the African expatriate N'Galo (Harry Baird), Sir Edward furtively arranges to have a drug delivered to his

room by blowpipe, which will give him the temporary appearance of being dead; once he is buried, Trench and Norton will exhume his coffin, gaining him his freedom. Trench decides to pocket his substantial fee and leave Sir Edward prematurely buried, but he lives to regret his decision when, some hours after Edward's panicked revival in his oblong box, he is dug up by some grave robbers for the experimental uses of a local physician, Dr. Neuhart (Christopher Lee). Neuhart is startled, upon opening the coffin, to have its disfigured occupant suddenly sit up and grab him by the throat. Donning a crimson hood, Edward sets about repaying "some very important debts" while residing under the blackmailed Neuhart's roof. Meanwhile, with the help of Trench, Sir Julian obtains a substitute corpse to represent his late brother at a public viewing, marries his much-younger sweetheart Elizabeth (Dwyer), and hires Sally (Sally Geeson), a maid formerly in Neuhart's employ who was fired after having a sexual tryst with Edward. When Julian reads a newspaper report of a series of murders attributed to a man in a crimson hood, Sally mentions Dr. Neuhart's houseguest. Quickly deducing the masked man's identity and realizing that his brother had been buried alive, Julian races to Neuhart's home, where he finds the doctor with his throat slashed. Julian doubles back to the estate to confront Edward, and to confess to him that he has borne a punishment that was actually intended for himself.

Julian Markham (Vincent Price) discovers that a voodoo curse, intended for him, has been dealt against his innocent brother Edward in THE OBLONG BOX.





Christopher Lee as Dr. Neuhart, blackmailed into providing room and board for "the Man in the Crimson Hood" in THE OBLONG BOX.

Though it bears the Edgar Allan Poe brand name and the title of Poe's 1850 short story, Hessler's film—scripted by Lawrence Huntington (**THE VULTURE**), who died during pre-production, and given "additional dialogue" by Christopher Wicking—has almost nothing to do with its supposed source. Poe's story was the macabre anecdotal account of a sea voyage, written by a man who found himself aboard ship with a former acquaintance, an artist renowned for his portraits of idealized women. The artist is travelling with two sisters, an oblong box supposedly containing some important works of art, and a veiled wife who stuns the narrator, when he finally sees her face, by being remarkably plain, if not ugly—hardly the mate he would have imagined for an artist associated with visions of rarified loveliness. As the voyage proceeds, the narrator discovers that the artist and his wife are not sharing the same room; instead, the artist spends his nights in the room with the box, which he overhears being opened on occasion. During a terrifying storm at sea that rips the ship's sails and forces everyone to abandon ship, the artist is seen tying himself to the box as though intending to use it as a raft—but both he and the box sink beneath the waves. It is later revealed that the artist's supposed wife was in fact his secretary and that the box contained the recently deceased body of his real wife, embalmed and preserved in beddings of salt, which was kept

secret so as not to discourage others from sharing the passage. The story concludes with the suggestion that the salt will eventually dissolve and the sunken couple will someday rise again to the surface of a becalmed sea.

Hessler's film contains only the faintest echoes of the story, in its references to a character's ugliness, a misrepresented corpse and the presence of an artist in the proceedings (Julian's friend Joshua Kemp, played by a florid Rupert Davies). It also has the aspect of premature burial in common with Poe, but nearly everything else about the film—its arcane magic, the subhuman relative who must be kept chained in a shuttered room, the deterioration of a noble line by virtue of its own accumulated sins, even the family name of Markham itself—echoes the greater influence of H.P. Lovecraft. The film is most inventive and contemporary in its study of empirical guilt, and its suggestion that, by colonizing other countries, nations run the risk of retribution from traditions and methodologies that the so-called "civilized world" cannot begin to understand or combat. According to Hessler, all of this was added to Huntington's rather hopeless script by Wicking.

In an unpublished interview conducted by David Del Valle at the 1984 San Francisco Film Festival, Vincent Price had this to say about the picture: "When the treatment of **THE OBLONG BOX** was sent to me, I liked the concept of English guilt over their

colonialism and the idea of one brother taking on the sins of the other. I assumed I would play both roles. The script was terrible, filled with clichés and lackluster ideas. My biggest complaint was that there was little for me to do or say, and I realized this would be, yet again, another attempt to profit on my reputation with this kind of film. Boris [Karloff] complained about this in his career with regard to producers and being typed. There were endless rewrites as I insisted on more to do as an actor. Unfortunately, although I was given more lines and so on, the end result was less than I had fought to make happen. Gordon Hessler was a dear man to work for, and over his head with the idiot they had in charge of European projects. Looking back, I wish Christopher had played my brother and we had a better script! It would have been more honest for the fans than to promote us as a team and yet only have one moment together as Christopher lay there with his throat cut!”

Despite the additional integrity brought to the script by Wicking, **THE OBLONG BOX** remains essentially half-baked on the script level, while other

disappointments are traceable to careless handling on the set. The first of these, as Price and many fans have noted, is that his and Lee’s characters have next to no interaction. The second, equally obvious, is the anti-climactic unmasking of Sir Edward. The movie encourages us to expect the revelation of a horrible monster and fails to live up to that promise. His mask torn away by Sally, Edward doesn’t look much worse than someone with a very large nose who has been stung by a dozen bees; indeed, in the day-for-night long shots of Edward which occur in the short amount of screen time between his unmasking and his death, it’s difficult to notice any serious deformity at all. This climax might also have worked better had Hessler given his audience a “before” to compare to Edward’s “after” face, but Alister Williamson’s face is averted from camera even in the pre-credits scene, before Edward is placed under the African chieftain’s curse of retribution. Hessler’s intention may have been to encourage dread, and audience sympathy for the character, by representing Edward with mostly subjective

*This German still captures Vincent Price and Christopher Lee’s only scene together in **THE OBLONG BOX**. The German title translates as “In the Death Grip of the Red Mask.”*



camera, but one imagines his performance as a wronged man being led to crucifixion would have served the same purpose more effectively.

Vincent Price appears to be acting under duress, and his romantic scenes with Hilary Dwyer, though faintly echoing the notion of colonization in a carnal sense, strike a false note throughout. This is not due to the actors' vast differences in age (she was 23, he was 58), which was common enough in 19th Century marriages, particularly among the gentry, but because these scenes have a forced and inorganic quality, as though they were whipped up and arbitrarily inserted to give Julian some happiness to lose. Dwyer's performance, as always, radiates warmth and sincerity, but the quality of the writing diminishes her, so that she seems a cameo guest in a film in which she is actually the female lead. Her servant, Sally, has a meatier role, and even Uta Levka, whose prostitute Heidi appears only long enough to be groped and stabbed, feels more present in the scenario. The role of Dr. Neuhart is likewise (ie., not in a good way) remarkable, for

casting an actor renowned for his authority in a thankless role that has less authority than those of the body-snatching stooges who live off his shillings. Poor Neuhart seems to spend the entirety of his screen time under one thumb or another.

Despite these faults, **THE OBLONG BOX** is the sort of film that might qualify as a guilty pleasure if it were somehow less respectable. It has a strong supporting cast, excellent production values and, stylistically, it takes a quantum leap in modernity for the series, with French-Canadian cinematographer John Coquillon introducing wide-angle lensing, hand-held camerawork and subjective point-of-view photography to the Poe universe—all of which help to thrust the viewer into the midst of action, and to better harness the psychological properties of Poe's writings onscreen, even as the scripts owe less and less to them.

THE OBLONG BOX has never had a reputation as a film plagued by extensive post-production interference, yet, before AIP released it to theaters, Gordon Hessler's first Poe film was not only shorn

*Marauding incognito, Sir Edward carouses with Uta Levka
in a scene newly expanded on MGM's DVD of THE OBLONG BOX.*



of nearly 10 minutes of violent, erotic and expositional footage, but the heart of the picture was extensively re-edited, so that the original chronology and pacing of events was badly disrupted. To judge from a surviving videocassette of an uninterrupted commercial broadcast of the AIP version, Hessler's 96m director's cut (now available on DVD) was hacked down to 86m 52s.

The changes made to **THE OBLONG BOX** begin as early as the very first scene. The opening sequence of Edward's crucifixion in an African voodoo ceremony was nearly reduced by half its original length of 3:50 to only 2:02. Cuts were made throughout the sequence, and were dictated more by redundant than violent content. The AIP version halted the native music and dancing almost as soon as the company logo faded out, with the arrival of Sir Edward; in the original, it continues for nearly a full minute.

At the burial of Sir Edward, Julian and Elizabeth saunter away from his gravesite. After responding to Elizabeth's reproaches that he should have confided Edward's misfortune to her, Julian beseeches her, "*You will stay? You will marry me?*" and she answers, "*Of course I will, darling.*" Here, the AIP version cut to the subjective angle shot of dirt being dropped onto the lid of the lowered coffin, the noise summoning Edward back to consciousness. This eliminated another of Price's lines ("*He has found some peace, too, as he never could have while he was alive*"), followed by a bottom-of-the-grave shot of the coffin being lowered in until its shadow darkens the entire screen, and then a shot of Edward as he lies dormant inside his coffin, photographed at an angle that does not reveal his face. This restored footage runs appears on the DVD at 33:56-34:12.

From the time of Edward's release from the grave into the care of Dr. Neuhart, the AIP and DVD embark on completely different cutting continuities. In the AIP, Trench and Mark's disposal of Hackett's body in the lake was followed by Neuhart opening the coffin and being shocked as its inhabitant grabs him by the throat. This scene cut to the discovery of the body by the artist Joshua Kemp (Rupert Davies) while walking his dog, Duke. After Kemp calls the dog away from the corpse, the scene cut to Edward donning his crimson hood, continuing to the point where Edward boasts to Neuhart of his intention of repaying "some very urgent debts." This scene cut to the dragging of the corpse from the lake, Kemp looking on as it is loaded onto a departing

wagon. As the wagon rolls away, Kemp ponders the man's identity aloud, and the scene dissolves to his studio as a detective (different to those who later investigate the Crimson Hood slayings) informs him that he has uncovered a mystery: "He died, it seems, from natural causes and either fell or was pushed into the water." As the detective leans toward one of Kemp's sculptures with an air of keen appreciation, the scene dissolved back to Neuhart's house, as the doctor enters Sir Edward's room to inform him that "The servants have returned."

The point of all this recutting seems to have been an attempt to make reparations for the removal of a dialogue scene between Julian and Elizabeth which immediately follows Edward's resurrection on the DVD at 39:15-40:17. As they walk the grounds outside the Markham estate, Elizabeth notices Julian's distant mood and suggests, "Why don't we spend the honeymoon in Africa?" To this, Julian responds that, after the death of his brother, he no longer has any desire to revisit Africa and is seriously considering the relinquishment of his family's holdings there. Elizabeth asks what this would mean, and Julian explains that, in the event of such a divestment, they would retain their titles as Sir Julian and Lady Markham, but "there would no longer be anything to go with the title." A daylight scene inserted between a number of night scenes, this exchange is awkwardly placed, but it communicates ideas which reinforce theme and are therefore valuable. After making his fortune by robbing the "innocent" natives of Africa, and after staging a memorial for his late brother with a proxy corpse, Julian announces himself ready to burn his bridges with the past, which would have the collateral effect of making him live a lie.

On the DVD, the aforementioned scenes follow a different chronology: Edward's resurrection is followed by the Africa talk, Edward donning the hood and talking with Neuhart, Duke's discovery of Hackett's corpse, the "servants have returned" scene with Edward and Neuhart, the body being dragged from the lake and, finally, the detective's visit to Kemp's studio. In numerical terms, the AIP resequenced Hessler's original cut so that scenes 1 through 7 were reshuffled as 1, 4, 3, 6, 7 and 5—with 2 (the Africa talk) eliminated altogether.

The AIP also removed nearly half of the stabblings inflicted by Edward on Trench's associate Mark outside the coach at 49:02, from eleven (as counted on the DVD) to only five. This is surely indicative of MPAA bartering, in order to win the film an "M" rating (ie., for Mature Audiences, all

ages admitted) rather than an "R," which would have blocked AIP's traditionally young audiences from attending without a parent or guardian.

The same is certainly true of the cuts that occur in the AIP version of the tavern sequence, when Edward is taken to a working class bar by two inebriated acquaintances. The most obviously prurient activity on display was forfeited by the AIP, beginning at 59:36-46, where a shot of a woman standing on a table to unpeel a stocking is followed on the DVD by a nearly bare-breasted woman who walks into a man's embrace and a lateral camera move that settles on the cleavage of another woman.

As Sir Edward follows the prostitute Heidi upstairs, he walks up behind her and tears the dress down from her right shoulder, grabbing her breast so quickly that her nipple cannot be seen. The AIP cut away at the moment her breast is clutched, eliminating the footage that continues on the DVD from 1:01:41-50. Here, he continues fondling her breast and lowers his mask to nuzzle her neck, Heidi remarks on the torn dress, "That will cost you extra." She smiles victoriously as he begins ardently kissing her, releasing her breast and leaving her nipple in plain view.

After a tactful cutaway to some untactful carousing in the tavern, the DVD cuts back to Heidi's room at 1:03:13, where we see 5s of a topless Heidi pulling her dress back on, in the background of the shot. The AIP resumed this scene at 1:03:17, as soon as Heidi's breasts were covered. The shot of Heidi's throat being slashed by Edward's knife (1:05:01) was also reduced by half its original length in the AIP, which did not show the secondary slashing of the left side of her throat.

Lastly, at 1:16:22-25, Trench is shown drunkenly engaged in foreplay with topless whore on a sofa. Her breasts are visible on the DVD, but AIP trimmed a second or two of her exposure while also darkening the shot optically to make her nudity less apparent.

Curiously, in 1990, some of the film's cut footage began to filter back in, when HBO Video released **THE OBLONG BOX** on VHS and LD (as a poorly matched supporting feature to 1963's **THE COMEDY OF TERRORS**). This release carried an "R" rating and found nearly all of the footage cut from the AIP theatrical release reinstated—with the exception of the two scenes baring the breasts of Uta Levka. This composite version, which was never shown in theaters, had a running time of 94m 22s.

THE OBLONG BOX performed handsomely at the boxoffice and AIP rewarded Gordon Hessler with a three-picture contract. His second project for the company, **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**, was an ambitious international co-production—in fact, the first co-operative venture between those two titans of Sixties terror, AIP and Amicus Productions. Although there is no official record of it, the film carries strong evidence of having been also partially funded by German interests, perhaps Artur Brauner's CCC Filmkunst GmbH, with whom AIP had co-produced **DE SADE** some months earlier. Not only are German actors present in **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**, but the inventive jazz score is distinctly German in character, very much in the mold of Peter Thomas' and Martin Böttcher's scores for the Edgar Wallace and Dr. Mabuse films. The score is credited to David Whitaker, but the film's late executive producer, Louis M. "Deke" Heyward, and Gordon Hessler have both acknowledged that the music was ghost-written. Credited as the film's "musical director" is Shel Talmy—the now-legendary British record producer who defined the studio sound of The Kinks, The Who and The Easybeats—but he was most likely credited for bringing the rock group The Amen Corner into the picture.

Alone of Hessler's AIP output, **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** had the distinct advantage of not being forcibly related to the Edgar Allan Poe series, which enabled him to do inventive work in a contemporary context. The film was based on **THE DISORIENTATED MAN**, a 1966 science fiction novel attributed to "Peter Saxon," a pen name used by the writing team of W. Howard Baker and Stephen Frances. Initially serialized in a British pulp magazine, it was first published in book form in America by Paperback Library in 1967, under the **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** title. The film rights were acquired by Milton Subotsky of Amicus, who then pitched his own screenplay adaptation to AIP's Samuel Z. Arkoff and James H. Nicholson as a vehicle that could go **THE OBLONG BOX** one better by co-starring Vincent Price, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing. AIP went for the idea and assigned it to Hessler, who found Subotsky's script to be unusably old-fashioned; once again, he recruited Chris Wicking to mastermind a more cutting-edge rewrite. Apart from replacing a silly alien explanation of events with a paranoid political *weltanschauung*, the resulting film is remarkably faithful to the Saxon book. Since its release in early 1970, **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** has bewildered many while exciting others, who



Hero Christopher Matthews (right) tries to solve the mystery of a severed hand composed of organic and synthetic tissues in SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN.

find its weaving of seemingly unconnected, parallel stories an intriguing change-of-pace in a genre starving for new narrative ideas.

Two-thirds of the narrative are deliberately oblique. The first thread involves the plight of a jogger who collapses under the main titles, and later awakes in a mysterious clinic, where he is attended by a silent nurse (Uta Levka) and gradually reduced to a literal basket case. At the center of the second thread is Konratz (Marshall Jones, whose natural satyr-like features resemble Dick Smith's makeup for Jack Palance's Mr. Hyde), an ambitious officer in an undesignated East European police state who climbs the military ladder by dealing death to his superiors (including Peter Cushing, in a brief role) with a Vulcan-like shoulder clinch. The principal story, which we reach only after so many minutes of this "disorientation," is about belligerent police superintendent Bellaver's (Alfred Marks) investigation of a series of "vampire murders." Two women raped and drained of blood are traced to a discothèque called The Busted Pot, and undercover policewoman Sylvia (Judy Huxtable) is sent there to attract the killer. She is picked up by Keith (Michael Gothard), who is apprehended in the act of drinking blood from her wrist but manages to twice elude the arresting officers with superhuman strength and speed. The ensuing chase culminates in an acid vat at the home of Dr. Browning (Vincent Price), a scientist supposedly engaged in cancer research.

In fact, Browning, Konratz and a British government official named Fremont (Christopher Lee) are all involved in a rapidly escalating political maneuver to infest the world with controllable, composite creations of real flesh and blood, fused with more resilient synthetics—beings of sinister intent which have in fact already taken over the world governments and military.

SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN stands out from Hessler's other AIP fare as a genuinely progressive work which, if anything, seems to be held back by the anchoring presence of its three familiar leads, who seem like chaperones at a party that one wants very much to get out-of-hand. Michael Gothard, one year away from Ken Russell's **THE DEVILS** and two years away from Barbet Schroeder's **THE VALLEY (OBSCURED BY CLOUDS)**, is the most exciting presence, coming up with a memorable ad lib when Sylvia, guessing the name of her dashing driver, ventures Michael ("Not today, lady..."). Gothard occupies centerstage throughout the film's justly celebrated chase sequence—which Hessler and editor Peter Elliott sustain for a remarkable, riveting 15 minutes plus—arguably the most dazzling action sequence ever issued under the AIP banner. As mentioned earlier, the combination of an artificial intelligence theme and a discothèque setting remind one of Michael Reeves' **THE SORCERERS** (1967)—which Hessler had not seen at the time, though Chris Wicking certainly had—and also the decadent night-clubs and mind control machinations on view in



*A priest (Marshall Jones) becomes suspicious when stud groom Roderick (Patrick Mower) demonstrates a mysterious power over animals in **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**.*

Fritz Lang's **Dr. Mabuse der Spieler** (1922). When the time came for its West German release, **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** was retitled **Die Lebenden Leichen des Dr. Mabuse** ("The Living Dead of Dr. Mabuse"), with Vincent Price's character of Dr. Browning rechristened Mabuse for the occasion. Though the film occasioned the first co-billing of Price, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing, Cushing does not share the screen with the other two. As for Price and Lee, they have a scene together but share the screen only once, for exactly 5s (1:32:08-13). For the remainder of the scene, the two actors could have easily shot their parts on different days.

Perhaps because **THE OBLONG BOX** had been so successful, its unorthodox follow-up did not experience the same editorial interference that Hessler's other AIP films would. Originally rated "M," **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** contains some incidental female nudity (never presented in a sexual context, but clearly meant to be titillating) and some mild cursing that was still considered rough at the time—yet when actor Christopher Matthews says "Crap!" at 1:05:06 on the MGM DVD, the word is redubbed as "Garbage!" As the trailer (2m 15s) included on the DVD shows, AIP paid so little attention to the final result that a shot of Marshall Jones (whose major role is curiously billed near the bottom of the end credits scroll) was used to identify "Peter Cushing"!

The film's real problems started only after its arrival on Vestron Video in the 1980s, when its original score was wiped and replaced with a

synthesized score by LA musician Kendall Schmidt (**NEON MANIACS**). Schmidt's work on this title was one of his better efforts—his synthesizer music seemed more at home here than in the 17th Century **THE CONQUEROR WORM**—but it was poorly integrated into the Busted Pot scenes, where the sounds of the actors' shuffling feet on the dancefloor was mixed more loudly than the music! Except for occasional television broadcasts, the original soundtrack remained out-of-circulation for more than a decade, until Orion accidentally issued the original soundtrack on VHS and LD (the latter through Image Entertainment) in the mid-1990s. Even now, on DVD, MGM's packaging continues to claim that the soundtrack has been altered, though the rescored version has not been available for more than a decade.

Unpleasantness is always an uneasy charge to level against a horror film, because the genre is meant to touch upon unpleasant subjects and feelings of dread and discomfort. But in the case of **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**, Gordon Hessler's third AIP production, the film is so unpleasant in its dramatized tortures of women and—more to the point—in the gratuitous liberties taken by some cast members while manhandling the actresses, that it is difficult to watch without feeling pangs of disgust or implication. When the AIP cut was reviewed by CINEFANTASTIQUE upon its

release in 1971, their critic noted that the prevalent tone of the picture was “disgustingly prurient”; one can’t begin to imagine what he would have thought of the director’s cut now available on DVD, which goes even farther over the top in this department.

That said, while **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** is not an easy film to like, it was clearly undertaken by all departments as an opportunity to make amends for the insincerity that crept into the previous two, through haste, lack of preparation, or (in the case of Vincent Price) professional irritation. It is the only one of Hessler’s AIP films whose characters become more interesting with repeated viewings. The cast is exceptional, with Hilary Dwyer at her best as Price’s not-wholly-angelic daughter, rare screen appearances by the Ukrainian stage actress Elizabeth Bergner and Sweden’s Essy Persson (**I, A WOMAN, THERESE AND ISABELLE**), and Patrick Mower playing yet again, but with fresh conviction, the same kind of character he had played previously in **THE DEVIL RIDES OUT** (1968) and **BLOODSUCKERS** (1969): an innocent man snared into serving a cult of devil-worshipping pagans. Even Price seems determined not to walk through another performance as he breathes bravado and vileness into a truly complex character.

That character is Lord Edward Whitman (Price), magistrate at the Court of Common Pleas in 16th Century England, whose principal occupation is the identification, trying and execution of accused witches. When Whitman and his sons—the cruel Sean (Stephen Chase) and the more sympathetic, Cambridge-educated Harry (Carl Rigg)—ride roughshod over a pagan ceremony in the woods, presided over by the witch Oona (Bergner), killing some of her disciples, the magistrate allows the aged Oona to live as an example, ordering her followers to scatter to the hills. As the Whitmans ride off, Oona promptly places a curse on “the flesh, the blood, the wife, the children and the house” of Whitman. (“We’re cursed from Hell to Christmas, we Whitmans,” Price later notes in an unintentionally funny line.) Oona then prays for Satan to deliver her an avenger—at which time Whitman’s own stud groom Roderick (Mower), an orphan who has resided with the Whitmans since his boyhood, emerges from the forest in answer. Roderick, who has a mysterious power over animals and exerts a comforting influence on Whitman’s maddened wife Lady Patricia (Persson), is having a secret Lawrentian affair with Whitman’s spirited daughter Maureen (Dwyer), and his love for her enables him to resist Oona’s urgings for awhile, but ultimately he cannot resist and becomes a shape-shifting Celtic demon called a *sidhe* (pronounced “she-hay”), who nearly lays waste to

the entire family until Maureen fires a musket into his face. A nightmarish coda sequence finds Whitman visiting Roderick’s unmarked grave for confirmation of his death, only to find his coffin empty and to have a priest (**SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**’s Marshall Jones, looking very much like Guru the Mad Monk) point out that those born of fire can only perish by fire. Whitman returns to his coach, where he discovers his surviving children savaged to death, and the horses gallop toward Hell with Roderick wielding the coachman’s whip.

CRY OF THE BANSHEE opens with an epigraph from Edgar Allan Poe: *“In the startled ear of night / How they screamed out their affright! Too much horrified to speak / They can only shriek, shriek / Out of tune...”* These unattributed lines are derived from his celebrated 1849 poem “The Bells,” which charts in three segments the corruption of a pleasant sound that fills the air (“What a world of merriment their melody foretells!”) into one of clamorous horror. It’s an appropriate selection, as the characters in this story are also haunted by a sound that fills the air, an unholy howl that sounds and returns to taunt and unsettle the accursed Whitmans, in a manner worthy of Poe’s tales of guilt-ridden conscience. (“It’s a hound with its paw caught in a trap,” one character speculates, “or a banshee telling us that Death is near.”)

Based on a script by Tim Kelly, which was reportedly only moderately revamped by Chris Wicking, **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** is a variation on the theme that was Michael Reeves’ **WITCHFINDER GENERAL**—which Gordon Hessler had not yet seen, though Wicking, Price and Dwyer certainly had. This similarity may have been the encouragement Price needed to take his performance more seriously, and Dwyer goes so far as to reprise her climactic scream in that earlier picture as she commits the murder that ties her fate to that of her father. The resemblance between the two films ends in their respective tenses: **WITCHFINDER GENERAL**, made in the revolutionary year of 1968, is a cry of outrage at the death of innocence and youthful optimism—a cry whose conscientiousness leaves us with at least a shred of hope; **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**, filmed in the early winter months of 1970, is post-apocalyptic from its first reel and unrelentingly despairing in its view of humankind, its characters seemingly damned even before Oona levels her curse against them.

Hessler’s original version of the picture was edited by Oswald Hafenrichter, a Yugoslavia-born cutter whose remarkable career encompassed **Scipione l’africano** (1937), Carol Reed’s Graham Greene collaborations **THE FALLEN IDOL** (1948)

and **THE THIRD MAN** (1949), Curt Siodmak's **LOVE SLAVES OF THE AMAZON** (1957), and the best and worst of Freddie Francis (1965's **THE SKULL** and 1970's **TROG**). Hafenrichter is also credited as editor on the AIP version, but when Hessler delivered his director's cut to AIP, it was cut by uncredited hands from 91 to 87 minutes. Unfortunately, simple subtraction does not begin to explain the extensive ways in which **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** was reworked prior to its American release.

Unlike the director's cut now available on DVD, the AIP version (86m 31s)—released on videotape in the 1980s by Thorn EMI Home Video, and on laserdisc by Thorn EMI/Image Entertainment (as a supporting feature to **COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE**)—opened with the Whitman massacre of Oona's pagan ceremony and the summoning of the *sidhe*, which occurs on DVD at 32:33s to 37:33. While this reassignment of continuity makes good dramatic sense, the presence of Harry Whitman at the raid is a gaffe, as a subsequent scene establishes him as not yet returned from Cambridge University. The relocated scene could have been made perfect with only one or two minor changes: 1) by cropping Harry out of the only shot in which he appears, and 2) by reshooting the introduction of Roderick to feature a younger, lookalike actor, identified by his bas relief medalion, who would be at the age when (as we later discover) he was found and taken in by Lady Patricia. This minor change, or both, would have greatly strengthened the revised context, but left as is, it's a bit shaky. Additional cuts were also made to the sequence, eliminating the drunken grave robber Mickey (Hugh Griffith) as an onlooker, as well as shots involving the nudity of the blonde character credited only as "Naked Girl" (Jane Deady), as she is seen lying on the altar (33:29-32) and immediately before she is netted and run through with a sword (34:18-34).

The two versions of **CRY** include different musical scores and main titles sequences. The DVD restores the original title sequence, a curious bit of Pythonesque animation by future director Terry Gilliam, which was replaced in the AIP cut by a sequence credited to Cinefx. Despite this attribution, the sequence consists entirely of uncredited freeze-frames from the Gilliam sequence, depicting various horned and winged demons against a red backdrop, and ending with a legend establishing the story's time and place. The original score by Wilfred Josephs (**DIE! DIE! MY DARLING, THE DEADLY BEES**) is classy but

unmemorable, while the replacement score by Les Baxter is at once more obvious, but also more colorful, atmospheric and appropriate to the material.

The scene which introduces Lord Edward Whitman, as he presides at the trial of Margaret Donald (Pamela Farbrother), is followed by a scene of the accused witch being whipped as she is led to a public stockade. Three separate shots glimpsing her bare breasts were removed from the AIP: 5:02-10, 5:39-48 and 5:54-57. When a farmer shows up with a bloodied sheep's carcass, announcing that a mad dog is loose in the region, the AIP omitted the close shot of the dead sheep's head at 6:31-32. When the supposed howl of this mad dog is heard throughout the director's cut (first at 9:02), it is an ordinary wolf howl; in the AIP, this sound effect was substituted by something far more unearthly and worrisome: an electronically treated howl that sounds like a synthesized yelp or yodel—not unlike the sound effect used in AIP's **THE DUNWICH HORROR** (1970) to represent the sound of invisible harpies lying in wait to trap dying souls. This sound, which far better represents the title than the original effect, was also heard during scenes which were not accompanied by a howl in the original cut, which made it easier to interpret as a haunting, psychological projection of Edward Whitman's deeply-rooted self-loathing.

After Whitman forces the teenage children (Sally Geeson, Richard Everett) of an executed witch to play Pan pipes and dance for the amusement of his family and friends, only to reward them in full view of everyone with cold-blooded murder, his young wife Lady Patricia is driven mad. Whitman orders his son Sean to escort his stepmother to her room, where he takes erotic liberties with her. The AIP eliminated everything that followed Patricia averting her face to deflect Sean's kiss (14:29)—including shots of her bare nipples, some aggressive, erotic kissing and an implicit orgasm for Lady Whitman—amounting to 1m 10s.

In the scene of the mad dog threatening the child visiting Margaret at the stocks, the sound effects were again changed. In the director's cut, the dog's barks sound as if they were dubbed in by a willing sound engineer, but the AIP used the sounds of a real dog.

The tavern scene beginning at 26:43—where Sean and his men pay a visit to the new serving girl, Bess (Jan Rossini), only to be distracted from their revels when another wench, Maggie (**THE GHOST IN THE INVISIBLE BIKINI**'s Quinn O'Hara), drops a basket of bird's wings and other suspicious-looking objects—was also extensively cut and altered by AIP. At the very beginning, a

saucy line from a balladeer's ribald madrigal "Blow Away the Morning Dew" (*"He threw her down upon the bank / and used her as he would / The maiden cried / 'Alas,' she sighed / 'I've lost my maidenhood..."*) was deliberately obscured by the overdubbing of background noise and the line, "Lass, bring us some ale." On DVD, we see Bess thoroughly abused by the men, having the front of her blouse opened, being groped and pushed from one man to another, with Bully Boy (Andrew McCulloch) bending down to forcibly nuzzle and steal sucks at her breasts. All of this was cut from the AIP (footage extending from 28:56 to 29:39), which jumped much quicker to the sadistic teasing of Maggie, whose own fleeting moments of above-the-waist exposure were eliminated by optically enlarging the frame and cropping out the offending nudity. When AIP moved the scene of Oona's coven to the pre-credits slot, its repositioning disrupted this portion of the film, so the tavern sequence was similarly repositioned so that it followed the forest assignation between Maureen and Roderick. In the DVD director's cut, the tavern sequence precedes the massacre and the tryst.

Other peculiar changes were made in the AIP version by darkening the scenes and adding strange tints. For no discernible reason, a roseate tint was added to the subsequent scenes of Oona shoving pins through voodoo dolls of the Whitman clan, which effectively turn the second

half of **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** into a kind of historical "body count" picture.

When Bully Boy and his compatriot drag Margaret Donald to the interrogation chamber in Lord Whitman's dungeon, the image quality of the AIP is so dark that, when one of them says "Ugly, isn't it? This is where we find out the truth!", one literally can't see how ugly the place is. But the darkness serves its purpose when the accused witch is hoisted in chains above a flaming brazier; whereas the bright DVD transfer permits a glimpse of nipple through her tattered blouse at 57:13, the AIP seems comparatively chaste without cutting a single frame. After Harry intervenes and drowns Bully Boy's fellow torturer in a vat of wine (Wicking's nod to Vincent Price's own demise in 1939's **TOWER OF LONDON?**), he and Lord Whitman listen attentively to Margaret's confession. On DVD, her bare breasts are distractingly visible throughout her soliloquy (1:01:04-51), but the AIP optically enlarged the shot to crop Pamela Farbrother's nudity offscreen—inadvertently redirecting the focus of the scene to her fine performance.

While Sean's death at the hands of the *sidhe* is left intact, though made to look less juicy by darkening the exposure, the gory slaughter of Lady Patricia was slightly cut for the AIP, with the final shot of her blood-streaked face (1:04:44-52) abbreviated by several seconds. The shot of Oona

Years after camping it up as Basil Rathbone's myopic daughter in THE GHOST IN THE INVISIBLE BIKINI, Quinn O'Hara returned to AIP to play an unpleasantly salacious scene in CRY OF THE BANSHEE.



consigning the effigy of Lady Patricia into her coven's bonfire was placed prior to her funeral in the AIP, but after the funeral in the director's cut. The sound of the "weepers"—the professional mourners attending Lady Whitman's funeral—also differs in the two versions, with evidently live sound in the director's cut, while the AIP re-recorded their wailing with professional singers to make the mourning more musical.

The public burning of Bess on a wagon wheel mattressed with straw was also shortened, to eliminate much of her terror as she is set alight. Finally, it should also be noted that the scenes of the *sidhe* stalking Maureen in the dungeon are far more effective on the DVD than in the darkened AIP version, which is so murky that its glowing red eyes (an effective touch) are not evident at all.

So which version of **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** is better? While the quality and presentation of the director's cut on DVD is undeniably superior, after comparing the two versions afresh, the AIP recut may well be more watchable (Baxter's vivid rescoring is a great help) and dramatically satisfying (ditto the decision to introduce Oona at the outset). By curtailing the leering prurience of the original, the film is also made somewhat less grueling and offensive. Hessler himself harbors no affection for the film, which he and Wicking were prevented from changing as much as they wanted, but he prefers the Wilfred Josephs score to Baxter's rewrite. Neither version being a classic, and both harboring their own unique characteristics, it shouldn't be necessary to choose between them; MGM should have released both versions on a single disc.

Somehow, one doesn't feel the same "right to survival" for AIP's recut of **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**. The last picture of Hessler's AIP contract, **MURDERS** was by far his most ambitious production. It was filmed on a more-generous-than-usual budget (approximately \$700,000 as opposed to **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**'s \$450,000) in Spain with an international cast and a new cinematographer, Manuel Berenguer. (John Coquillon had since joined forces with Sam Peckinpah to make **STRAW DOGS**.) Berenguer was himself an AIP alumnus, having previously photographed 1969's **La Residencia** (which AIP released in 1971 as **THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED**), as well as their earlier Spanish import **PYRO** (1963). The screenplay originated with Henry Slesar, a colleague of Hessler's from **THE ALFRED HITCHCOCK HOUR**, but was reworked by Wicking to include some of the Pirandellian flourishes that

Richard Matheson had worked into his script for **DE SADE**. The story was told in many different layers and tenses—the "real" story, the play within the story, the heroine's recurring nightmare, along with flashbacks as well as flash-forwards—so that the viewer was kept deliberately off-balance as to which reality was on view at any given moment.

The film is not an adaptation of Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue": instead, this is the title of the play being performed by the husband-and-wife team of César and Madeleine Charron (Jason Robards, Christine Kaufmann) at the Rue Morgue Theatre in Paris. This is just the first in a series of narrative surprises which attend the opening reel: we are introduced to the characters in a setting that we accept as the movie's reality, only to have it exposed—once we start feeling superior to its increasingly shoddy execution, its bad ape suit and cheap set decoration—as a stage play; the actor playing Erik is then revealed to be Rene Marot (Herbert Lom), a supposedly dead actor who faked his own "suicide" years before after his face was destroyed onstage with real acid, who has similarly disfigured and killed the true Erik; he flees the theater, a veritable Phantom of the Opera (as Lom had played before, in 1962), and pauses in his flight from Inspector Vidocq (Adolfo Celi) and the French police to kindly drop a coin into the tin cup of a blind beggar.

Marot, like César, is romantically obsessed with Madeleine, as they were with her mother, who was also a stage actress named Madeleine (Lilli Palmer—playing a woman quite a bit younger than herself and mostly getting away with it). Madeleine, in turn, is obsessed with a recurring dream, to the extent of not being terribly present in her own story; her dream images—a masked axe man, visions of her mother's house, a length of rope falling from the theater catwalks, followed by a falling man—descend upon her, without warning, regardless of whether she is awake and acting, or sleeping in bed. As other veterans of Charron's acting troupe (Maria Perschy, Marshall Jones) are found dead with their faces destroyed by vitriol, Vidocq begins to suspect César himself ("So now we have a *real* murder in the Rue Morgue!"), but the truth of the matter is more complicated. It involves the dwarf Pierre Triboulet (Michael Dunn), a "secret admirer" who has an orchid delivered to Madeleine's dressing room each night, and the actress' own suppressed childhood memory of the circumstances surrounding her mother's death. In the end, her recurring visions are revealed to be psychic "flash-forwards" to events which are destined to actually occur—two years before



Christine Kaufmann is tormented by dreams of a masked axeman in Gordon Hessler's 1971 version of *MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE*.

Nicolas Roeg explored this same technique in his masterpiece **DON'T LOOK NOW** (1973).

Even in the original version now restored on DVD, **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** is more of an *aspiring* masterpiece than an accomplished one. Things went astray with the casting of Jason Robards as César Charron, a role clearly written with Vincent Price in mind. Hessler doesn't know to this day why he didn't get Price, but it is likely that the actor had notified AIP that he wanted no more *faux* Poe pictures on his resumé; he was still under contract to AIP and had just completed the first of two "Dr. Phibes" films for them, which brought him renewed popular and critical acclaim. The casting of Robards was likely AIP's attempt to make their Poe films more "respectable" in the marketplace with a more mainstream cast. Regardless of Robards' obvious talent and experience as a stage actor, his underplayed, dead-pan acting style was ill-suited to the dialogue and to the genre itself. This problem was compounded by the porcelain passivity of Christine Kaufmann's character, and Celi's overly refined interpretation of the investigating officer, resulting in a fascinating experiment that comes to life only when Herbert Lom and Michael Dunn are onscreen. The opening sequence of recursive, reality-peeling set pieces is a *tour de force*, and there is a marvelous *trompe l'oeuil* later in the film (51:58-52:11) as Vidocq's associate Aubert (**THE OBLONG BOX**'s Peter Arne, in an otherwise nothing part) pursues

Marot at a carnival; we see Aubert (actually Arne's stand-in, viewed only from behind) hoping to intercept Marot by boarding a turning carousel, which performs a single revolution, without cutaways, to bring Aubert (Arne himself) back into close-up with his throat slashed—a cleverly designed continuous shot worthy of Hitchcock. A second viewing of the film shows the film's staging to be very true to its final revelations: Madeleine succumbs to her dream state whenever César (who is ultimately revealed to have killed her mother with an axe in front of her eyes when she was still a child) raises an axe onstage to repel Erik.

Hessler's cut, restored for DVD, is nearly 10-20m longer than AIP's preferred running time of 80-90m, and this is surely one of the reasons for their editorial interference. Another was Sam Arkoff's personal distaste for any kind of romance or artistic ambiguity in their horror pictures—**MURDERS** was rich in both. In an interview with Tom Weaver, included in his 1991 collection *SCIENCE FICTION STARS AND HORROR HEROES*, Gordon Hessler suggested another motivation: "England was where practically all the AIP pictures were being done at this time; literally, the Americans were doing little or nothing. There was a great rivalry there, and I suspect that's probably one of the reasons why **RUE MORGUE** was re-edited—so all the editors in America could re-assert themselves. Lilli Palmer had an marvelous role in the picture—she was the catalyst for the

film to shift into a new gear, and her role made the whole story make sense—but it was almost all cut out! *Incredible!* They cut it down so she was almost an extra. I don't know what she must have thought when she saw the film."

The AIP recut of **MURDERS** is no longer available on video. It was never given a laserdisc release, but it was given a video-cassette release in 1986 by Lightning Video, with a running time of 86m 55s. The changes in the film began with Madeleine's first fainting spell onstage, as Erik prepares to carry her away and César responds by taking an axe to the creature. The ensuing dream, and all of Madeleine's dreams thereafter, unfolded under an orange tint, explicitly bracketing them as something other than a waking reality.

The film's main titles were moved closer to the beginning of the picture, actually interrupting a line of Christine Kaufmann's dialogue. While taking their curtain call, César cautions Madeleine: "You must learn not to fall asleep onstage." The first syllable of her response ("Oh, César, don't joke—it was horrible!") was interrupted as the scene cut, crudely, to the following shot of Marot-as-Erik watching them from the wings. Jason Robards' above-the-title credit was superimposed over Erik's face, which then cut to the theater exterior, where the advertising banner supplied the title of the film. After the credits, the action resumed with the ape actor strolling to his dressing room.

When a stagehand discovers the acid-scarred corpse of Erik in the dressing room, his panicked search for a policeman was shortened by AIP, as was the following police pursuit of Marot through the night streets of Paris.

As César exits the theater after his first meeting with Inspector Vidocq, their dialogue and Vidocq's exit were dropped so that the action could cut directly to César receiving the letter from his ex-lover Genève (Maria Perschy). Also cut was a brief glimpse of children enjoying a puppet show performed at the carnival by Pierre, whom the AIP version showed exiting the puppet stage—but without the scenes establishing the puppet show, it was impossible to tell what kind of box-like contraption he was exiting. This omission spoiled the resonance of another scene, late in the film, where



His face disfigured by acid, stage actor Marot (Herbert Lom) inflicts the same pain on his former colleagues...

César and Madeleine are disturbed by the similarities of a puppet performance to the details of their presumed-successful murder of Marot by smothering him with a pillow. Only because the earlier scene establishes Pierre as the puppeteer do we understand from this later scene that the dwarf has survived his apparent stabbing by César.

Prior to the next stage performance, another cut scene (13:49-14:10) shows an actress being romanced in the wings by a fellow actor. Two other actresses walk by and pound the offstage sheet of metal used to create thunder effects, to startle them. A stage manager comes in response to the noise and charges the two lovers a penalty of two francs for the disturbance. Near the end of the film, while being pursued by Marot through the empty theatre, Madeleine backs into this thunder plate... but in the AIP cut, it was never introduced so the prop—like the puppet show—went without explanation. The subsequent dialogue scene between César and Madeleine in their dressing room (14:10-35) was also cut.

At his designated place of assignation with Genève, César has an introductory exchange with the proprietress of the house, Madame Adolphe (17:15-39), which was also cut by AIP—as was a later snippet from the downstairs revelries, depicting a man drinking champagne from a woman's slipper (21:14-26) as Madame Adolphe looks on. Also deleted was a morning conversation between the Charrons on the morning after Genève's

murder, which lasts until Madeleine leaves the house to walk to the theatre (23:17-24:10). The scene gives no indication of how they obtained the news of the murder, and its placement is also peculiar, in that César implicitly leaves the house later than Madeleine, but in the next scene is shown arriving at the theater first, while Madeleine meets her “secret admirer” *en route* to the Rue Morgue through a park.

During the shot of The Great Orsini (Marshall Jones) being sealed inside a coffin to be “buried alive” (33:22-35), AIP removed the deliberately phony “hoo hoo hoo” weeping sounds on the soundtrack as his female assistant drapes herself melodramatically over the coffin lid. The entire burial scene was also given a tighter re-edit, to play more briskly.

The flashback to the hospital, after Marot’s disfigurement, was cut short so that it ended with the attending nurse (an unbilled Brooke Adams in her first feature film) telling César: “Oh yes, sir. He can speak, alright,” followed by César’s bridging voiceover “Shortly after, he committed suicide...” which cut to the shot of him cuddling Madeleine. This edit not only betrayed the story by suggesting that Madeleine’s mother, who was also visiting (and is seen only with her back turned), did not visit Marot, but also sacrificed Lilli Palmer’s best scene in the picture, as she lingers behind to reconfirm her love to Marot and propose marriage (47:57-49:55), to the tender accompaniment of a lush, romantic cue by composer Walter de los Rios.

...including Genève (Maria Perschy) in *MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE*.



All references to Marot’s obsessive love for Madeleine were cut, beginning with the scene in the bedroom of her mother’s house where César finds them together. In Hessler’s version, the dialogue scene runs slightly longer as Marot rhetorically asks, “Must a man die twice for his crimes? Must a man suffer twice—for the woman he loves?” and kisses Madeleine’s hands, before César throws himself upon him. Later, as Madeleine is pursued by Marot on the catwalks of the empty Rue Morgue Theatre, he says only “Madeleine, I’ve come for you” in the AIP, while in Hessler’s version he adds, “I’ve had my revenge, but it’s not enough... I need love.” After falling to his death on the stage, Marot was also deprived of his dying words by AIP: “The will! The will lives on after death!” However, these words were reassigned to AIP’s reconstruction of an ending they considered too oblique.

Hessler’s original ending began with Madeleine alone in her house and waking upon hearing footsteps climbing the stairs toward her bedroom. The doorknob turns and the presumed-dead Pierre enters, laughing as he presents to her another boxed orchid. The implication of this scene is that Marot, Pierre’s master, has managed to conquer death once again and will continue to haunt her dreams, as well as her waking hours. The AIP version ended slightly differently, but differently enough to destroy a carefully built-up mood of unease. Here, Madeleine wakes, hears the approaching footsteps, and sees the doorknob turning. Then there is a blunt cut to a freeze-frame of Madeleine’s about-

to-scream face, as the edited words of Marot are played in voice-over: “The will! The will lives on!”

By comparing the two versions side-by-side, we can see that, while Hessler’s version was not exactly destroyed by the AIP recut, its subtlety and ingenuity were certainly compromised. His comments to the press about the extremity of the changes may seem overstated in retrospect, but he considered **MURDERS** to be his finest work up to that time and AIP’s confused vulgarization of his intentions represented a violation of his art and trust. Now that Hessler’s director’s cut has been retrieved and



*Wielding his Vulcan death pinch, Marshall Jones brings the curtain down on Peter Cushing's brief appearance in **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**.*

preserved on disc, the alternate version that was shown in its stead for its first 30 years of life asserts very little interest; it's merely a reduction, without the added interest that, say, Les Baxter's score brings to AIP's recut of **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**.

With the above information in mind, MGM Home Entertainment's "Midnite Movies Double Feature" DVDs of Gordon Hessler's AIP films are easiest to appreciate as something they don't claim to be: important restorations of hitherto lost works. This is just the beginning of a virtually faultless and most inviting, four-course presentation.

The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.net) reports that both **THE OBLONG BOX** and **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** were photographed by John Coquillon at a ratio of 1.85:1. Both have been moderately cropped (to 1.78:1 and 1.81:1 respectively) in order to facilitate 16:9 widescreen transfers. **THE OBLONG BOX** fares quite well, while **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** tips its hand quite early with some very tight-looking main titles, with the uppermost credits clipped by the upper matte. The transfers are of highest quality when the images are brightest, but in the darker scenes, blacks tend to look like slate rather than true black, while shots involving heavy darkness, smoke and fog are prone to mild artifacting—at least when viewed

in 16:9. Most impressive is the color sensitivity of the transfers, which were authored by Sunset Digital Studios: the crimson hood worn by Sir Edward in **THE OBLONG BOX** was little more than a blaze of red noise in its earlier presentations on VHS and LD, but on DVD, the color is not only a potent red but so free of distortion that we can readily see the texture of its fabric. In **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**, when Konratz's first victim gets pinched, his skin can be seen graduating into a full blush, and conflicting shades of hair color show us exactly how Peter Cushing's toupée was worn to match his hairline. The mono sound quality is very good, though the original sound mix of **SCREAM** is quirky, with the club's live band (The Amen Corner, who perform the title track and "When We Make Love") mixed low, tinny and over-echoey, while the jazz score accompaniment springs the subwoofer to life.

French, Spanish and English subtitles are provided, and the latter—taken from the actual scripted dialogue—offers an opportunity for a rare insight into the different approaches taken by Vincent Price, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing in regard to their line readings. Price was candid in later interviews about not understanding the story ("I didn't know which scream I was supposed to be playing"), and his performance as Dr. Browning is all over the map, especially in the third act, where he seems alternately visionary, eye-rolling

mad, prissy, paranoid, egomaniacal, philosophical—in short, Goldfootian. His difficulties become even more obvious as we read his lines along with him; the lines actually read perfectly well, but Price speaks them—with additional conversational fills—as though he had no aptitude whatsoever for science fact or fiction, always punching-up the wrong words to convey the text clearly. Cushing, in his short scene, is letter-perfect and prone to drawing attention to himself with props and certain words and phrases with expertly calculated pauses for effect. But perhaps most impressive of the three is Christopher Lee, who is given the most boring dialogue to contend with, yet approaches every line from a slightly unexpected direction that revitalizes the tired dialogue and makes Fremont seem more experienced at his work than the actual scripted dialogue would have him be. This is an engrossing way to revisit a familiar movie, and is an approach particularly commended to students of acting and directing.

Theatrical trailers are also provided for each film on its respective side of the disc. **THE OBLONG BOX** trailer (1m 51s) includes enough old-fashioned degree of hyperbole to make it seem like a relic from earlier in its decade, and the onscreen text curiously dumbs-down “The Man in the Crimson Hood” to “The Man in the Red Mask.” The preview for **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** (2m 15s) runs longer but is cut much more briskly and does its job well. Both are 16:9 enhanced and in excellent condition.

In regard to the second disc, **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** appears to have been shot at full aperture Academy ratio with the intention of being soft-matted at 1.66:1. The Terry Gilliam titles measure 1.63:1, while the remainder of the picture looks at times visibly cramped in its anamorphic 1.80 ratio. **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** also measures 1.80, but it seems more likely to have been shot with the intention of being shown in a 1.85:1 hard or soft-matte ratio. Compared to the earlier Lightning Video VHS release, **MURDERS** loses some picture information at the top and bottom of the frame, and shows slightly more of the left periphery, but it looks consistently well-balanced throughout, including the main titles. Both 16:9 transfers feature bright color, and there is no evidence of artifacting, despite extensive night shooting and scenes in dark quarters. The color and clarity of the image are again impeccable, so detailed that, in **CRY**, you can see the pale makeup base worn by Dwyer, and the period costumes in both pictures seem to offer an infinity of

eye-pleasing colors and textures. The mono sound quality is clear and reasonably forceful in both cases. Comparisons of the English captioning and the spoken dialogue yield no particular divergences or insights, which may reflect that these production had more rehearsal time than their predecessors.

Anamorphically enhanced trailers for both films are included on their respective sides. The **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** trailer (2m 27s) is interesting for including some of the footage that was trimmed from the theatrical release, including a topless shot of Pamela Farbrother as she is being flogged in the streets, while the trailer for **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** (2m 49s) is amusing for dating an excerpt from Poe’s 1843 poem “The Conqueror Worm” (“*And much of madness / and more of sin / and horror the soul of the plot...*”) as 1839, and suggesting that the picture is “based on the novel by Edgar Allan Poe.”

Though Gordon Hessler’s involvement was not sought for the first disc (which was released earlier), the **CRY/MURDERS** disc makes amends with two on-camera interviews, A DEVILISH TALE OF POE (17m 42s) and STAGE TRICKS AND SCREEN FRIGHTS (11m 28s), both directed by Greg Carson. The former is the most informative, as it covers Hessler’s background and finds the director going into considerable detail about his preferences in films (he regrets being typecast as a horror director and would have preferred making movies like his favorite, **CASABLANCA**), his theories of cinematography, and his reminiscences of colleagues like Sam Arkoff and Vincent Price. Full-length audio commentaries might have been more specifically instructive, but they are also more of a gamble. As it is, these shorts are a very nice souvenir that fulfill their purpose well.

Seen at long last in their original form, Gordon Hessler’s director’s cuts make his true place in the histories of AIP, the Edgar Allan Poe series, and the horror film in general much easier to understand objectively. He was very much part of an undeclared movement, among young British directors of the time—Reeves, Roeg, Peter Sykes, Antony Balch, John Hough and the Spanish emigré José Larraz, to name a few—to nudge the horror film toward a greater maturity, by making it more complex, impressionistic, sensual and political. Hessler didn’t have the personal affinity for the horror genre that produces its masterpieces, but his work was nonetheless unusual, adventurous and worthy of being remembered.

Now that he has finally had his say, there is no doubt that it will be.



Return to the Rue Morgue

*A Conversation with
Gordon Hessler*

By David Del Valle

Gordon Hessler today, as he appears in the on-camera interview featurettes included on MGM's *CRY OF THE BANSHEE/ MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE* DVD.

The man who took American International's Edgar Allan Poe series into the 1970s, German-born, English-educated Gordon Hessler broke into the American entertainment business as a story editor for the legendary ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS TV series and, later, as an associate producer and producer for THE ALFRED HITCHCOCK HOUR. Like many other aspiring directors, he regarded AIP as a good career move, but the films he made for them would be filled with disappointment and frustration. The scripts were often terrible, beset with problems that time could never set right. Yet Hessler did his best under difficult circumstances, and the results are still being discussed decades later—much to his surprise and delight.

Hessler is a courtly man with great charm and sophistication. He lives in the old section of Hollywood where Spanish style homes were the rage, and his is no exception. Nestled high above Sunset Boulevard, he and his wife live in the former home of Raymond Burr, where one can still see the greenhouse where Burr once cultivated his beloved orchids. The Hesslers enjoy a spectacular 180° view of the City of the Angels.

This interview was arranged to discuss the rediscovery of the long-lost director's cut of his last AIP film, **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**, and perhaps to reassess his career. The last time I spoke with Gordon Hessler, he was trying to cast the female lead in the picture that became

GIRL IN A SWING (1989)—a part eventually played by Meg Tilly. Much acclaimed in advance of its release, and much reviled after the release of a recut version, **GIRL IN A SWING** was to prove yet another nightmare of distributor interference with Hessler's art and the single greatest regret of his directorial career.

There is hope: Hessler is in possession of the sole surviving 35mm print of his original director's cut. One hopes that it, too, will resurface someday as a fully restored DVD. —DDV



Let's start with your reaction to the recently discovered restoration of MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE...

Well, I still can't figure out how or why this happened! As far as I know, the only time my cut was screened was in Spain, the year it was made, to show Sam Arkoff. At the time, he seemed to like it very much. Usually, Sam would make a couple of suggestions for pacing or to make cuts for time. I cannot remember any remarks about recutting the finished film.

But cut it they did. Did you see the version that AIP released in America?

Yes, I did. I immediately wrote Sam a letter—which I still have—that explained in great detail what needed to be restored for the film to make

Unseen in English-speaking countries for the past 30 years, Lilli Palmer's best scene in MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE is now restored on DVD.



sense. This letter would mark the end of my relationship with American International.

If you recall the film, I was trying a different approach from using flashbacks. Christopher Wicking and I came up with the idea of "flash-forwards," to give the film a fresh and unique angle. The Christine Kaufmann character keeps having hallucinations of events that are explained with Lilli Palmer later in the film.

The restored version brings the Lilli Palmer character back into the movie. Did you cast her yourself?

Yes. I drove to her home in Switzerland and convinced her to appear in the film. She was a great actress and the film was the better for her participation in it.

She was also in DE SADE, which it's said you partially directed. Had you also directed her in that?

No. I never really worked on that film. The director was to have been Michael Reeves, but he was ill and I could not get along with Cy Endfield who replaced him. Deke Heyward suggested I do **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** instead.

Did you have much of a hand in casting your AIP films?

Not really. You see, I was brought on **MURDERS** after the major talent was secured. Jason Robards and Herbert Lom were set. Jason was a huge

Broadway star, getting top money and great perks on that film. Halfway through, Jason said to me "I should be playing Herbert's part and he should have mine!" I said, "It's too late. At the onset, they would have given you whatever part you wanted." He was a pro and finished the film, but I know his heart wasn't in it. He had none of the flamboyant attributes Vincent Price would have brought to such a role. However, Vincent was having problems with Arkoff and wasn't asked to be in **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**. Had Vincent played either of those parts, the film might have been a classic!

That film has an amazing cast, regardless. Michael Dunn, for example... What to you recall of him?

He was a brilliant fellow—very bright, but totally alcoholic. He consumed two bottles of hard liquor a day, maybe more. He was desperately unhappy, yet his drinking never interfered with the shoot. But bear in mind: he didn't have that much dialogue.

You've told me before that you had this problem with other actors in your films.

Broderick Crawford immediately comes to mind. But, once again, he seemed able to work in spite of having had a lot to drink. On **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**, Hugh Griffith was also intoxicated most of the time, but he was such a dear, lovely man! Everybody loved him. I recall hiring a fellow just to watch Hugh and make sure that he didn't have too much.

A minute ago, you mentioned Deke Heyward, who executive produced most of your AIP films. Deke passed away last year, and I was hoping you might elaborate a bit on his value to you as a producer?

Deke Heyward was the unique head of production for AIP in London. Hollywood had discovered a break, which the British government gave to film makers shooting in England, if they employed a set percentage of British technicians. A big wave of US filmmakers came to England at that time and Deke's position increased in importance as AIP shifted all its features to London. Deke rented the top floor of a quaint four-story building built in the Georgian period as a private residence in the fashionable area off Grosvenor Square. The office had a tiny rickety elevator that could hold about three people and it was touch-and-go if it would make it to the top! I often wondered, working very late at night or on weekends, what would happen if you got stuck in it with no chance of getting any help.

The late Michael Dunn, as he appears in MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE.





*During the filming of **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**, Gordon Hessler (right) had to keep a close eye on actor Hugh Griffith.*

Deke had a magnificent art collection and was always acquiring paintings in Europe. Many of these hung on the office walls and were quite valuable. He furnished the office with antique baroque furniture, including an ancient working organ. It was unlike any film company office. Sam Arkoff and Jack Nicholson would come over periodically for a few days, staying in a palatial suite at the Savoy, to approve films, go aheads, and budgets etc. Deke had a substantial sense of humor. The reason I was able to work so well with these projects was Deke Heyward's ability to deal with Arkoff. I always found Arkoff a difficult man to communicate with. Although he had a sense of humor, he was terse. It was a strain to get any sort of conversation going. He was a numbers man. I believe he was suspicious of artists. As he would say, "Don't give me any of that 'artsy fartsy' stuff." Deke knew how to handle and entertain him.

You also mentioned Michael Reeves earlier. Wasn't he supposed to direct **THE OBLONG BOX**?

Yes, he was. I was to produce **THE OBLONG BOX** and Michael was signed to do four pictures for AIP.

How well did you know him?

I only met him on three or four occasions. At the time, I had not seen any of his work and, by the time I saw **WITCHFINDER GENERAL**, he was dead.

Were you aware of his problems at any of those meetings?

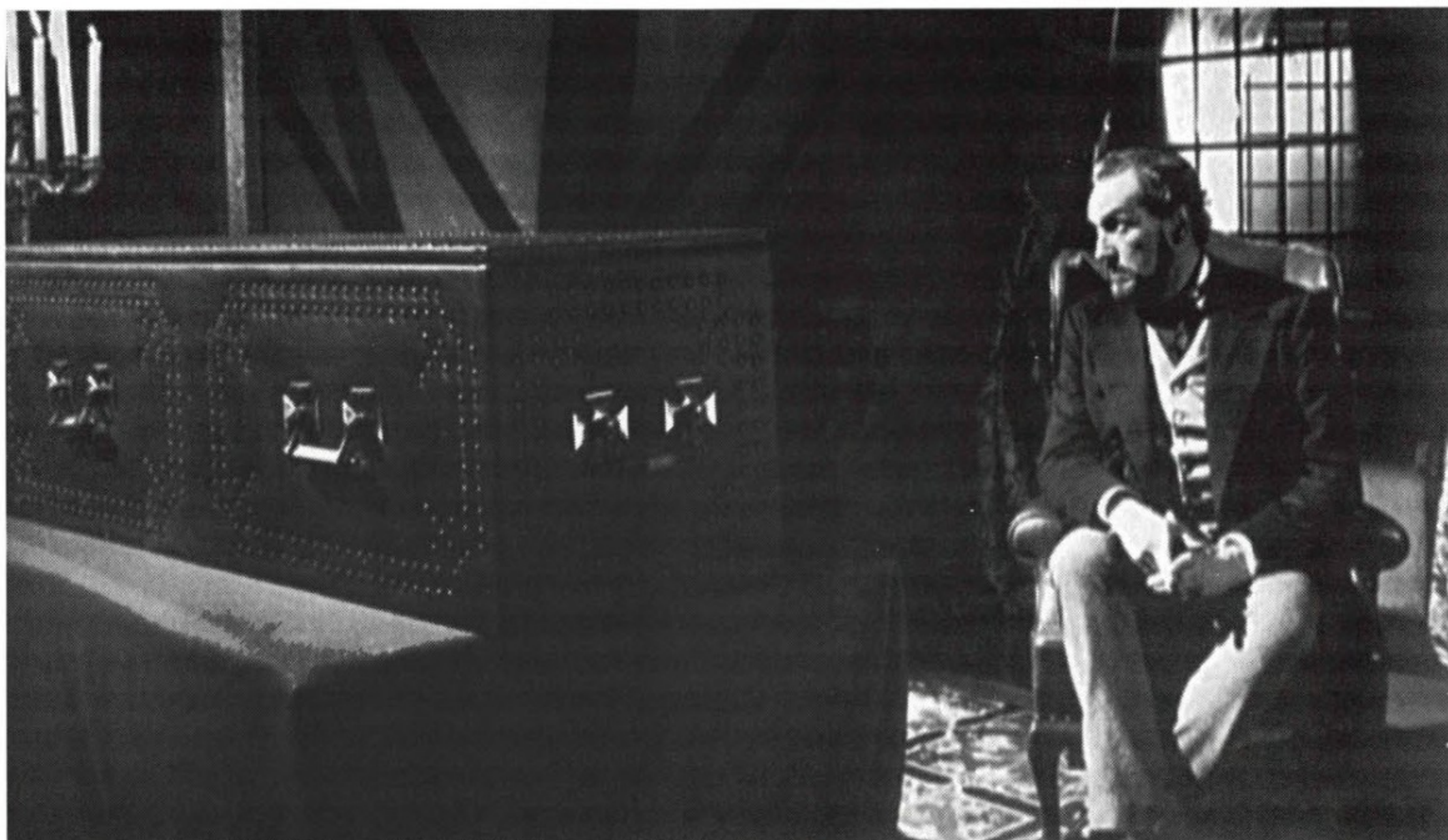
There was one occasion when we were sharing a taxi and he revealed to me that he was undergoing electroshock treatments and was having bouts of severe depression. As his producer, this was very alarming. I sensed that he might not be able to work, but I didn't feel comfortable discussing it with anyone at the time.

Did he actually start to direct **THE OBLONG BOX**?

No. There were a couple of meetings that were basically script conferences. I remember, at one of the meetings, Michael picked up the script and threw it across the room, announcing what we already knew—that it was rubbish!

How did you go about fixing it?

Well, Chris Wicking did a marvelous job putting together what had been an incoherent treatment



Vincent Price, clearly fed-up with playing second fiddle to ostentatious coffins, in THE OBLONG BOX.

involving premature burial. He created the voodoo motif that opens the film and the theme of colonial guilt, which—had it been explored properly—might have made a better film. Chris was an absolute lifesaver on projects like this. He is a real film buff and understands the mechanics of the horror film. He can tell you about every actor and even the technicians that have worked on horror movies. He isn't too keen on dialogue, however. **MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE**, for example, was problematic from the start, because Edgar Allan Poe wrote a short story that is virtually unadaptable. So Chris took certain elements—like the gorilla that carries off the girl and the premature burial of Herbert Lom—and combined them with the *Theâtre du Grand Guignol*, thereby bringing elements of Poe together with some clarity.

Now that THE OBLONG BOX has been released on DVD, those of us with old videotapes of the AIP version can see how extensively it was cut and re-edited. There's a whole exposition scene of Vincent Price and Hilary Dwyer discussing Africa that no one in America has ever seen before! Were you aware of how extensively it was cut and did you have any input into the edits?

I never had a quarrel with the cuts on **THE OBLONG BOX**. Frankly, when I saw the new DVD it was the first time I had seen the film since it

was first edited. I don't remember the African property exposition scene being cut. It may have been taken out for length.

Regardless of Chris Wicking's repairs to the script, I take it you're still not very happy with THE OBLONG BOX?

Except for **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN**, I didn't really care for any of the others. The problem in making films for £75,000 is that there is very little time for rehearsal, or being able to research, or for the luxury of marvelous locations like Scotland and Ireland. I had wanted to shoot **CRY OF THE BANSHEE** in Ireland. Chris and I spent a couple of months researching pagan religions to create a more fascinating script, but Arkoff just wanted us to get on with it. You know, that company [AIP] was known for selling the poster of a film before even a script was created! So, naturally, the emphasis was on having the film completed—regardless of the quality!

You mention being especially fond of SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN. What made it special for you?

That particular film worked very well mainly because, once again, Chris Wicking took the pulp novel it was based on and created an interesting premise that was really ahead of its time. The idea of transplants is not a new one, but combining it

with political intrigue and vampirism made it unique. The producers were Milton Subotsky and Max Rosenberg. Milton was a great character and a horror movie fan of the first order. He loved finding these stories and loved the filmmaking process.

Vincent Price was such a great sport on this film. He was required to submerge himself in a vat that was made up to look like acid and he did it all without complaint. I believe he enjoyed himself as much as possible.

What can you tell us about working with Vincent?

I wish I could have known him better. As I said before, there is no time on a film set to really get to know the cast. Even though I did three pictures with him, I can't say I really knew the man. I recall that, during **THE OBLONG BOX**, an African prince visited the set and Vincent knew the art of the region the prince was from. He was so knowledgeable and sophisticated—a real gentleman. My wife and I recently purchased some art that was at auction in New York from Vincent's estate.

For some reason, when we were making **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**, AIP insisted it was Vincent's 100th film, which it was not. The publicity people insisted on Vincent being present [at the wrap party] and I rang Vincent to ask him to come. He said he "absolutely would not" because of his arguments with Sam Arkoff. And I told him, "Vincent, it's your 100th film celebration party! You must come!" So, reluctantly, he arrived and, at some point, he was asked to cut this lavish birthday cake. No one could find the knife that had been left to cut it. So Vincent said, in a very loud voice, "Just take the one out of my back!" Of course, we all knew what he meant.

Moreso than the others, SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN is sort of a cult movie. But, well-liked as the film is, the fans always complain about one thing: it stars Vincent Price, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing—yet there are no scenes featuring the three of them together! Why wasn't an opportunity created for these horror stars to share a scene?

David, you should realize something about my knowledge of horror films at that time. I knew nothing about Christopher Lee or Peter Cushing! I think I knew they worked for Hammer and were typecast in this kind of film. Vincent was a movie star who also was being typed in these films, but at the time, it just didn't occur to me that it was important for them to share the screen together.

Chris Wicking was always onto me to go and see some of these films. Eventually, he and I went to the midnight cinemas that literally showed one film after another until dawn, and this was the way I finally saw some of these horror pictures.

Fritz Lang was reportedly a great fan of SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN. I can see a tremendous Lang influence on the film, with its political intrigues—and Uta Levka is kind of a Brigitte Helm robot for the '70s. Was Lang a conscious influence of yours while making this film?

I wish I could say that Lang was an influence, but he wasn't. I was never a conscious fan of horror films or for that matter would go to see any of them. I was pushed into the horror field because I worked for Hitchcock and got typecast. I consciously never tried to see any of the horror films of the time, as I thought it would influence me in style. Today I find that position somewhat naïve.

One of that film's most striking performances was given by the late Michael Gothard, who played the android.

Oh, is he dead?

Yes, he committed suicide.

I had no idea. He was a very good actor and looked absolutely right for the role we had in mind. I was very pleased with his work in the film.

I believe working in your film brought him to the attention of Ken Russell, who cast him in THE DEVILS.

Well, I thought he was wonderful and I'm very sorry to hear about this.

The cameraman on your AIP films, John Coquillon, also committed suicide.

He was a brilliant cameraman and was starting to work on very important films and his career was moving into the stratosphere. I couldn't imagine why he would take his own life... except, later, on someone told me that he was homosexual and was having problems coping with it, and that this led to his suicide.

I've always wondered... Have you ever read David Pirie's book A HERITAGE OF HORROR, which has some very nice things to say about your horror films? At one point he commends your (and I quote) "audacious technique, evolved in documentary and newsreel work, [which] resulted in a camera-style which



Consulting the script with actors Stephen Chase and Jan Rossini on the set of CRY OF THE BANSHEE.

probed his characters and sets as though they were under some kind of visual interrogation.” What do you think of this quote? And was this actually something you specifically strived for, or was it more due to the input of Coquillon?

David Pirie sent me a copy of his book. I was flattered by his comments. What I was trying to achieve in camera style was something that was different to the traditional fixed static approach of the typical Hammer horror films of that time. Many of the scripts were stiff and formulated, so I liked the roving camera style to give a flat story more suspense. John Coquillon had a very young camera operator who was exceptional in hand-holding the camera—thus the Pirie “roving camera” quote. Today, you have very expensive equipment with complicated gyros that do the same thing.

As an example: when rehearsing a scene in an interior of a rented house with cramped rooms, it is much easier to have fixed shots for the lighting. It is much easier on the DP. He can light each shot to perfection. Once you start moving the camera, lights and reflections would come into camera view and sound men, on the move with wires, would trip over each other. Before long, you would have a disaster on your hands with a

lot of hours lost on a very tight budget. For the cameraman, there is a huge compromise on the quality of the lighting. Actually, it is that drop of quality that gives my films this “documentary look.” John Coquillon took these tests with outward calm. As I rehearsed the scene with actors moving from one room to another, I saw that the scene could continue without a cut, so I entreated John to keep extending the scene. He was always up to the challenge.

Can you talk a bit about how you worked with your composers? David Whitaker is credited with the SCREAM score, but this name didn’t ring a bell with Deke Heyward when I spoke to him. He thought most of the music might actually have been written by an associate of Whitaker’s.

I always remember meeting the composer during the editing stages and going through the film with them. I assumed David Whitaker was the composer, but after the film was finished, I heard a rumor that he had hired some young ghost-composer to do his work. I never found out if that was true.

You mentioned that you hadn’t seen any of Michael Reeves’ films at the time you met him,

but that you did later. Was his movie *THE SORCERERS* at all inspirational to you on *SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN*, which is a similar hybrid of contemporary horror and sci fi?

I had never seen any of Michael Reeves' films till many years later when someone showed me **THE SORCERERS** in the States. I was very much impressed with his work. I felt it was the best of the Price series.

Your work is often compared to Reeves', probably because you filled his void at AIP in those years following his death. But it really isn't fair to compare your films to his, for several reasons. For one thing, you had to cope with so many things Reeves never had to cope with... You were not only directing but also producing, you don't seem to have had much input into the casting, and there were probably a great many other problems with international co-production realities, especially on *MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE*. Can you talk a bit about what it was like to have to juggle all these other things, on top of directing?

The advantage of producing and directing a movie is you have much more control over how the money is spent. When you are working as a director, a producer is constantly worried that you are spending too much time on a scene and somehow you are not going to make the schedule. He doesn't understand that some scenes are throw-aways and some scenes are key. You want to spend more time on important scenes, such as the climax for instance. You may prepare a very complicated scene that could take a whole morning to prepare, but when you start filming you have five minutes in the can in five minutes. If you have not turned the camera for a whole morning, it appears as a disaster in the production office. The producer is only looking at amount of time per day it takes to complete so many minutes of finished film. If you know you can complete the schedule without supervision, you don't need the producer. When I worked for AIP, Vincent Price was under contract to make so many films for the company; he came with the picture. Deke would always want to get some well-known actor to help boost the cast. It helped raise the stature of the film. We would work very closely together on this end.

You made these films in the early '70s, which many people remember as a period of great cynicism and disillusionment after the optimism of the 1960s. In some ways, *WITCHFINDER GENERAL*

is about the death of that optimism, and your films seem much more cynical, more despairing—your characters are all damned from the beginning. Even the eroticism in your films is joyless. Did you and Chris Wicking ever give any thought to this, or what sort of impression you hoped your body of work would project—or were you just in there, getting the job done?

It would be nice to say we consciously were aware of the cynicism of the '70s... but I certainly was not. You would have to ask Chris Wicking if he felt this way.

At the time, in spite of the budgetary limitations, did you enjoy making these films?

Oh, yes! This was one of the great times in my life. London in the late '60s was absolutely glorious! I was living very well at the time. In **CRY OF THE BANSHEE**, we had access to magnificent costumes. They were beautifully made, really works of art. Remember, the film industry in England was in full flood. All the studios were busy. We were able to make these films look far more expensive than they really were. I'm very proud of the look of these films. I only regret we didn't have more time to develop the scripts more fully.

We started this interview by discussing the restoration of *MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE*, but I know you are even more concerned with restoring your 1989 film *GIRL IN A SWING*.

Yes. I had several conversations with John Calley, a top executive at the studio that owns the film, who was living with Meg Tilly. I sent over my own restored print for him to work from and it looked like my film was going to see the light of day when Calley and Meg Tilly decided to separate! He called to tell me that he was now unable to work on **GIRL IN A SWING** any longer. So I will just have to wait and see what can be done next.

Supposedly the rights are currently held by MGM, so perhaps they can be persuaded to release a director's cut of *GIRL IN A SWING*?

I hope you are right, but we will have to wait and see.

Lastly, now that you've seen the MGM restorations of your AIP films on DVD, what are your thoughts?

I was very surprised at the quality of the restoration work MGM did on the DVDs. It was unnerving to see them after so many years. I do hope they will be enjoyed.





Eraserhead



Reviewed by Bill Cooke

Unclassifiable and, to many, incomprehensible, it's amazing that **ERASERHEAD**, the feature film debut of director David Lynch, ever garnered a theatrical release in America. But it did, thanks to savvy distributor Ben Barenholtz, who knew that if this study in surrealism was ever going to find a home, it would be on the midnight circuit that canonized other mid-'70s oddities like **THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW**, **PINK FLAMINGOS** and **EL TOPO**.

Approved as a 42m short during David Lynch's fellowship at the American Film Institute's Center For Advanced Film Studies in California, **ERASERHEAD** was an 11th hour inspiration after the former painter and experimental animator suffered pre-production woes on a never-realized project titled GARDENBACK. Amassing a small but loyal cast and crew, Lynch built interior sets in the remote "stables" of the AFI, where he shot—off and on—in the dark of night over a period of four years. By the time he finished, the young director had gone through two cameramen (Fred Elmes replaced Herb Caldwell) and spoon fed the depleted budget with money earned from delivering **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**, as well

as contributions from associate Jack Fisk and Fisk's actress wife Sissy Spacek. He also no longer had a short. Running nearly two hours at its official premiere, the film caused something of a pickle for the AFI, as the institute had an agreement with Hollywood that it would never produce features that could potentially compete with the big studios. To this day, **ERASERHEAD** remains the only feature funded by the AFI.

Described by its maker as a "dream of dark and troubling things," **ERASERHEAD** begins with a sequence that symbolically represents both a conception and a birth... Inside a derelict shack on the surface of a diseased, oblong asteroid, a horribly deformed man (Jack Fisk) pulls a series of levers that cranks up churning machinery and releases an umbilical cord-like fetus (or is it an

John Nance in an inexplicable moment from ERASERHEAD.

ERASERHEAD

1977, Absurda, DD-2.0/16:9/LB/+,
88m 40s, \$39.95, DVD-0

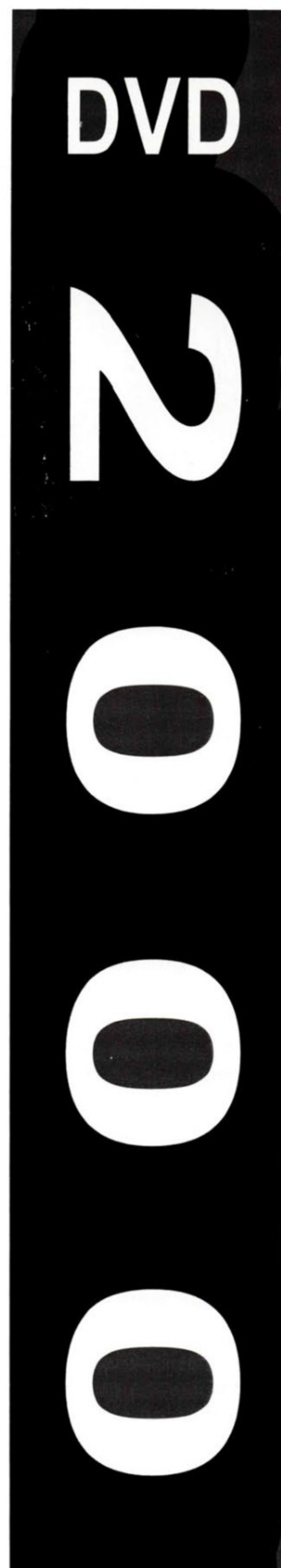
exaggerated spermatozoa?). The rope-like thing is pulled through a liquid membrane and the screen goes black... momentarily. A light appears in the void, like the opening of a tunnel, drawing us closer and closer until it blindingly overwhelms the screen. The dream ends... or so we think. In the world of David Lynch, it's really impossible to tell.

In the next few scenes, a plot tenuously emerges. We're introduced to the dreamer, Henry Spencer (John Nance), a bug-eyed young man with a crazy vertical coif, who wears a black suit adorned with a pen-laden pocket protector and an expression of perpetual nausea. On vacation from his job at a printing factory, Henry learns from the nymphomaniac across the hall (Judith Anna Roberts) that his girlfriend Mary has called on the pay phone, inviting him to dinner at her parents' house that night. Arriving late, Henry meets a nervous Mary (Charlotte Stewart) on the doorstep and expresses his confusion over her recent avoidance of him ("You never come around anymore"). The awkwardness continues inside where he's introduced to Mrs. X (Jeanne Bates), another nymphomaniac who slips her tongue inside Henry's ear, and Mr. X (Allen Joseph), a retired plumber bubbling with excitement over the man-made chickens that he's baking ("Little damn things... smaller than my fist... but they're new!"). After strained conversation and an unpleasant dinner (one of the miniature chickens comes to life beneath the carving knife and squirts blood), Henry learns from the mother that Mary is not only pregnant by him, but she's already had a premature delivery. Mary then adds the most joyous news of all—that the people at the hospital aren't even sure it *is* a baby!

In the ensuing days (weeks, months?), Mary moves into Henry's tiny one-room apartment, along with their progeny, a limbless creature that mews day and night. Eventually the strain of parenthood becomes

too much for Mary; she packs her things and moves back home, leaving Henry alone to take care of the baby that soon afterward becomes terribly sick. As he dutifully nurses the parasitic thing, our protagonist becomes a prisoner in his own apartment and starts slipping in and out of dream states. Following a sexual encounter with the nympho across the hall, Henry has a disturbing nightmare about his disembodied head, which is sold as fodder for pencil erasers. To escape these feverish reveries (almost all involving the baby in some way), Henry keeps returning to the fantasy of a warm and inviting world inside his radiator—a place where a squirrel-cheeked lady (Laurel Near) dances across a vaudeville stage, stomps on ugly fetuses that rain down from the rafters and sings yearningly to him: "In Heaven... everything is fine."

Unabashedly surreal, undiluted by commercial dictates and boasting the most harrowing "happy" ending of all time, this is David's linchpin work, both reflective of earlier experiments (his 1970 short *THE GRANDMOTHER* was also a study of isolation in which a character created a metaphysical being for companionship) and providing the raw material for the director's future nightmares. In a way, **ERASERHEAD** is like the opening, developmental movement in one gigantic symphony, of which **WILD AT HEART** is the scherzo, **THE STRAIGHT STORY** is the adagio, and **MULHOLLAND DR.** is the recapitulating finale. Here we see the introduction of recurring motives such as: the director's signature orifice imagery (Henry's coveted maggot that springs to stop-motion animated life and swallows the camera is a clay ancestor to the giant sandworms of **DUNE**); existential passages through space (**THE ELEPHANT MAN**, too, ends with the main character's ascension into Heaven); the lure





Laurel Near as an inexplicable character from ERASERHEAD.

of voyeurism (Henry's peep-hole fascination with the woman across the hall is the germ that erupted into **BLUE VELVET**); dream-like figures performing on a stage (the Lady in the Radiator has close cousins in **BLUE VELVET**'s Isabella Rossellini and Dean Stockwell, as well as the Latino lip-sync artist of **MULHOLLAND DR.**'s Silenzio Theatre); and the *noir*-ish notion of the good-girl blonde and the bad-girl brunette (further developed and twisted to extremes in **BLUE VELVET** and **MULHOLLAND DR.**).

To say that **ERASERHEAD** is autobiographical would turn anybody's head, but it's true—to a degree. Both the depressing *mise-en-scène* and the "domestic crisis" plot stem from Lynch's experiences in Philadelphia, where the struggling artist married and had a child (daughter Jennifer, the future director of **BOXING HELENA**). It was an environment that Lynch found both scary and hostile, a place where "dark and forlorn" neighborhoods were tucked between factories and seemed to be "lost in another place."

Lynch's paeon to Philly is effectively established in an early scene of Henry walking home: the background is a bleak, industrialized landscape, photographed in gloomy B&W, that subtly disturbs us because, despite the constant barrage of factory sounds, there isn't a sign of life other than Henry. Thereafter, the bulk of the film takes place on custom-built sets that are tiny, depressingly

minimalist (the view from Henry's apartment window is a brick wall) and only faintly illuminated by the filmmakers' exact lighting schemes that tend to isolate characters and objects while surrounding them in oppressive darkness. The world of **ERASERHEAD** is perhaps the most consistently uncomfortable environment ever created for a film. It is a place where organic life is twisted, perverted and barely hanging on (Henry's room is decorated with a twig in a mound of mud; puppies suckle at their mother like rats feasting on a carcass), while machines—incessantly roaring and belching steam—seem to be thriving and have a temperamental life of their own. There is little dialogue in the film, and whenever people do speak, they don't seem to connect ("What do you do?" "Oh, I'm on vacation!"). The cumulative effect is that of the most unrelenting, suffocating nightmare.

Perhaps more than any other factor, it is the ingenious sound design that imbues **ERASERHEAD** with its unique "vibe." A collaborative effort between Lynch and sound recordist Alan J. Splet, the sound is really half of the film. Again inspired by the palpable mood of Philadelphia, Lynch's conceit was that environmental sounds from the outside should be constantly "felt" within the film's interior spaces. As Bill X speaks to Henry across a room and becomes excited in his discourse, the sound of an unseen machine grows

louder and louder until it seems as if a train is about to crash through the house. An extension of the character's emotional state, the sound dissipates as soon as Bill's conversation breaks off and he leaves the room.

Though the noisy sound design is intended to annoy, elements are always layered in complex and sophisticated ways. In an early scene, Henry returns to his apartment and puts on a record, a silly ragtime tune played uncharacteristically by an organ. As he sits on his bed eyeing the radiator before him, the sound of the radiator, an omnipresent snake-like hiss, sneakily rises in volume until it becomes overwhelmingly loud. This overpowering pitch is maintained, even as Lynch cuts to Henry's point of view of a window and the brick wall beyond it. Upon this darkly comic image we hear a heavy thud from outside. Cutting back to Henry, we see his pained expression, and a second thud resounds like a hammer blow to his heart; he breaks out of his reverie and the hissing abates, but during the turmoil the tune has been obliterated and replaced with the relentless scratching of a record needle. This is a simple scene from a visual standpoint—just a few static shots of a man sitting on a bed, a radiator and a window—but through creative use of sound, it has been transformed into the film's most powerful statement on the oppressiveness of Henry's world.

The only music heard in **ERASERHEAD** is source music that plays on records or "plays" in the mind of Henry Spencer; appropriately, all music is performed on an organ, an unnatural knob and pipe-laden instrument that would look very much at home in the bowels of this planet of machines. Forsaking a traditional music score, Lynch and Splet instead "compose" in sound, expressing characters' heightened emotional states and alternating between quiet, dream-like moods (the strange liquid quality to the ambience of Henry's room as the woman across the hall seduces him) and hair-raising *fortissimi* (the electrifying "hell breaks loose" finale). As in a music score, the sound design contains recurring "motifs" that aurally identify symbols, places and moods: the hissing radiator, the wind of the black void, the low-frequency hum that kicks in at key moments to heighten our anticipation of something momentous, and the startling machine effect that underlies scenes of gut-wrenching horror. Indeed, the film's soundtrack album consists of this oppressive sound collage, as well as its dialogue and few source songs.

Having retained the rights to his film, David Lynch has released **ERASERHEAD** on DVD himself

in a definitive edition that should instantly relegate all previous middling presentations—including Region-2 discs from Japan, France and the UK—to the eBay auction block. The packaging alone makes this the most unusual DVD of the year. Available only through the filmmaker's website for about \$50 after shipping (DavidLynch.com is a membership-only site, though the gift shop can be accessed free of charge), the fun begins when an ominous black box arrives at your doorstep. Upon prying it open and parting a shroud of red tissue paper, you won't find a flaccid worm (thankfully), but a second black box with a slip-cover oddly emblazoned "DVD 2000" (it wouldn't be truly Lynchian if it wasn't confounding). The package includes a business card with the disc's specs and a souvenir booklet that collects some interesting odds-and-ends from the past, including a page from the original typed outline (amazingly close to the final film), a Libra Films invitation to a midnight screening ("We'd like you to meet the sweet little girl who has brought so much sunshine and joy to our world") and a half-page of storyboard drawn on water-stained notebook paper.

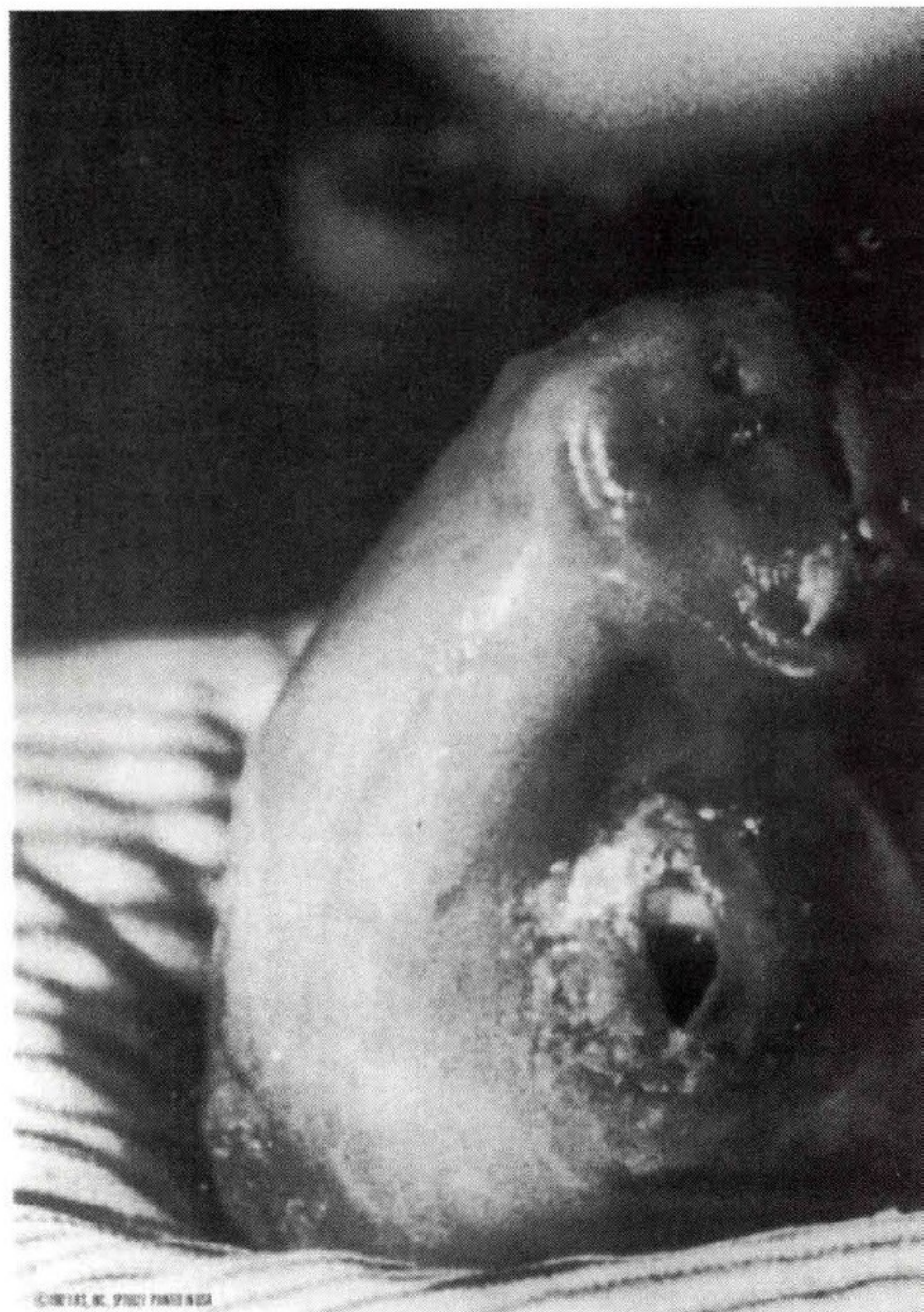
After freeing the disc from its cardboard prison (a bit daunting), prepare to be amazed. The culmination of a painstaking restoration process that involved a high-def transfer of a fine-grain interpositive and the digital cleaning of around 130,000 individual frames, this is the most immaculate presentation of this title to ever reach the market. Outer space is once again a black void with vivid pinpoints of light, not the hazy gray curtain of previous overly bright video incarnations. And resolution is simply astonishing, revealing subtle environmental details and textures that have been muddled before, such as the mound of straw that adorns Henry's dresser top and the tangled bed of grass below the radiator. If you have a mind to, you can freeze the image and count every hair on Jack Nance's nappy head. The 16:9-enhanced picture is letterboxed to its correct theatrical ratio of 1.85:1 and, while there is a slight amount of visual information lost to three sides compared to the Comstock Japanese laserdisc and DVD, compositions look perfectly judged throughout.

The soundtrack has also been remastered, though there is some confusion over its configuration. The souvenir booklet claims it is uncompressed PCM, while the business card specs say Dolby Digital 2.0; a quick hardware check proves the latter to be correct. The new sound mix is refined compared to previous releases (the unnerving effect



of the suckling pups has been too faint in previous incarnations, but now comes through loud and clear); however, the ubiquitous low-frequency hum can be a bit too forceful at times, particularly in the scene of Henry checking the baby's temperature. What should be a quietly tense "moment before the storm" is spoiled by a window-rattling subwoofer effect. Like all Lynch-approved DVDs, there are no chapter stops.

Supplements include the trailer (already a feature of the Comstock releases) and a captivating 85m B&W video interview with the director, replete with Lynchian touches like a curtain backdrop, a big old-fashioned microphone and a howling wind sound effect. While his memory is sometimes fuzzy (he vividly recalls Jack Nance's hatred of Alan Splet's spoon scraping the bottom of a yogurt cup, but doesn't remember anything about the writing of **ERASERHEAD**), Lynch still manages a more-than-satisfying account of the film's production. Stories include his first meeting with Splet ("Like a bean pole in a shiny black suit... I shake his hand and I can feel the bones rattle in his arm"), the uncannily easy casting ("It was like Fate was dropping them on the doorstep"), and the frantic effort to complete the film for inclusion at Cannes. (They didn't make it; Lynch found out later that the Cannes folks had left NY two days before his arrival and that his film was projected in its entirety to an empty auditorium!) Interspersed throughout the talk are stills—at one point we see a Polaroid of the X



Charlotte Stewart, John Nance and...

family sitting on a couch and Lynch beams, "It's a good looking family"—and even some rare, ancient B&W video footage that was shot between takes by Fred Elmes. Unexpectedly, some of the most fascinating moments occur when Lynch periodically digresses from the topic of filmmaking to tell "slice of life" stories about his off-set experiences during those years, some of which have found their way into the director's *oeuvre*. When he describes his first day in California ("I couldn't get over how bright it was... it felt so good... it was unbelievable"), we suddenly realize what inspired Betty Elms' awed reaction to sun-drenched LA in **MULHOLLAND DR.** A number of his tales involve restaurants and eating (he does go on about the Dutch Apple pies at Hamburger Hamlet!), wherein we can glean the origins of food loving FBI Agent Dale Cooper from **TWIN PEAKS**. But perhaps the most amazing yarn of all is one that was told to him by Alan Splet about his and Herb Caldwell's near-death experience on a country road in pitch-black night...



...their inexplicable progeny from *ERASERHEAD*.

"As they're driving, Herb is talking, telling a story fairly rapidly... Suddenly the talking starts to not make sense; it's rapid nonsense. The lights are now illuminating the road, and the car is starting to go off the road. Herb's voice is now going up in pitch. They're on the shoulder of the road and his voice is going up higher and higher in pitch even though Alan is screaming at Herb right next to him. Herb doesn't hear and his voice becomes a little squeak. Finally Al hits him and Herb comes out and comes back on the road in the nick of time."

After a beat, Lynch adds: "They continued the trip just fine, though Al had to keep a good eye on Herb." He laughs and goes on to something else, but Lynch fans' minds will be reeling, for surely this bizarre episode is the source of such gibbering Lynchian horrors as the backward-speaking dwarf of *TWIN PEAKS* and the squeaking old couple that attacks Diane Selwyn in the insane finale of *MULHOLLAND DR.*



About halfway through the talk, Lynch calls former crewmember Catherine Coulson to pick her brain for more anecdotes. Via speakerphone, Coulson recalls their on-set inspiration to tease then-husband Jack Nance's hair into the stylized "do" that made cult movie history. She also laments the loss of several scenes, including one that featured her and a friend being tortured on a bed by a man brandishing battery cables. Lynch claims he still has a bit of that scene and Coulson enthuses, "I'd love to see that someday"—but sadly, it doesn't appear anywhere on the disc. Of the 20m that Lynch cut following the film's premiere at the 1977 Filmex in LA, it's still a mystery how much of this deleted footage has survived. At one point, Lynch offers an answer of sorts: "I could have done a lot better job of taking care of things... I've lost a lot things from **ERASERHEAD** that I wish I'd kept."

The only extra footage offered (other than an outtake of the Lady in the Radiator following the documentary) is a short bit cut from Henry's walk home, in which he tripped on a wire connected to an oil-soaked mummy of a cat. Yes, this is *the* infamous cat that Lynch obtained from a veterinarian (post-mortem) for the express purpose of dissecting. It was his educational exploration of the cat's innards that most likely led to the repulsive realism of the sequence wherein Henry cuts open the baby (still one of the most disturbing sequences I can think of). The bit has not been reinstated into the film, but serves instead as a peculiar background for the DVD's menus. 🐾

DVDs



"The Monster from the Surf" prepares to add another trophy to his collection in THE BEACH GIRLS AND THE MONSTER.

THE BEACH GIRLS AND THE MONSTER

aka **MONSTER IN THE SURF**

1964, Image Entertainment,
DD-1.0/16:9/LB/+, \$24.99,
65m 57s, DVD-0

By Shane M. Dallmann

THE BEACH GIRLS AND THE MONSTER (not to be confused with **THE HORROR OF PARTY BEACH**) marked the last starring role—and the first and only directorial effort—of Jon Hall, perhaps best known as a former two-time Invisible Man and the male lead of **COBRA WOMAN** for Universal Pictures. Those who remember this obscurity (which was filmed in

1964 in response to the success of AIP's **BEACH PARTY**, but released the following year) may well associate it with its once-frequent television airings under the title **MONSTER IN THE SURF** and wouldn't expect it to ever pop up in widescreen on DVD—but here it is, courtesy of Wade Williams.

The partying teens of Malibu Beach are enjoying an afternoon of innocent fun—but when mischievous Bunny flees the crowd after coating her boyfriend's hot dog with sand, she's abruptly set upon by a clawed, reptilian-looking monster and earns the newspaper headline "Surf Beauty Clawed

to Death." As the slaying is investigated, a domestic drama unfolds in the home of oceanographer Otto Lindsay (Hall). Much to Lindsay's displeasure, his son Richard (Arnold Lessing) aspires to surf the beaches of Waikiki and spend time with his girlfriend Janey (Elaine DuPont, whose real-life husband, Ray "Crash" Corrigan, played **IT! THE TERROR FROM BEYOND SPACE**) rather than apply himself to a serious career. Meanwhile, Lindsay's flagrantly disloyal second wife Vicki (Sue Casey) might be having a fling with local sculptor Mark (voice artist/puppeteer/kiddie show

host Walter Edmiston). Might the stories be related? And if so, how?

Admittedly, this film (produced by cartoonist/ animator Edward Janis and written by his collaborator/wife Joan Gardner Janis) invokes some surprisingly mature subject matter for any sort of "beach party" movie, courtesy of the adult characters. The Hall/Casey angst-and-alcohol melodrama wouldn't seem out of place in a more sophisticated mystery/thriller, for instance, and the violence (monstrous and otherwise) is surprisingly tense and bloody. None of this, however, is helped by most of the surrounding material: attempts to identify the murderous species yields the howler "This isn't the claw print of any fish in this area!" and Mark stupidly runs from the scene of another killing (fleeing police gunfire) when the slightest bit of forensic examination would exonerate him. But any attempt to get viewers to take the film seriously is decisively scuttled by the beach crowd. While they briefly acknowledge their sorrow and regret at Bunny's demise, that doesn't stop them from immediately staging their next party—or from spoofing the incident by singing along to the (astonishingly insensitive, all things considered) musical number "There's a Monster in the Surf" (yeah-yeah-yeah)! In this sequence—the favorite of many a viewer—Edmiston hides beneath dark glasses and false beard, doubling as one of the teens as he manipulates his own puppet "Kingsley the Lion" to perform the song he wrote himself on the spot. The puppet master was also responsible for the creation of the monster's head, which was made to replace the one missing from a rented costume. While the beast itself is only slightly less

silly-looking than the infamous **PARTY BEACH** monsters, it's actually one of the film's most believable elements (to say anything of its origins or motivations would instantly move a review of this brief feature into spoiler territory). The film's soundtrack and the opening theme song "Dance Baby Dance" were the hurried work of Frank Sinatra, Jr. (who receives larger billing than the lead players on the DVD case), while Lessing wrote and performed "More Than Wanting You." In addition to starring in and directing the film ("allegedly" directing, according to some of the cast), Hall also served behind the camera. While most of his work in this department is efficient, perhaps only he could have explained why a closeup of his character's hand angrily squeezing and shattering a cocktail glass dissolves into a mismatched image of a man's hand covered with sand during one curious transition.

The opening titles are presented in extreme windowbox—from there, the image jumps to a 1:80:1 presentation. While this adds some horizontal information to the old, familiar TV version, there's really nothing significant to report here. And while the effort is commendable, the restoration of the original title and aspect ratio doesn't fully replicate the theatrical experience: when two characters take time out to watch some Waikiki surfing footage, what was once a color insert sequence (and still is, when AMC shows the film) remains in B&W on the disc. Other than that, **THE BEACH GIRLS AND THE MONSTER** gets the full treatment: clean Dolby Digital mono sound, a good-looking transfer, production anecdotes and interview quotes in the thorough liner notes supplied by Tom Weaver;

the original theatrical trailer (1m 34s), a slideshow of B&W and color stills (5m 18s), and for those with DVD-ROM capacity, an excerpt from the original screenplay. The feature has been assigned 16 chapters on the menu and, as usual, an impossible-to-miss "Easter Egg" conceals trailers for **BELA LUGOSI MEETS A BROOKLYN GORILLA**, **SHE DEMONS**, **MONSTER FROM GREEN HELL**, **THE FLYING SAUCER** and **THE CRAWLING EYE**.

THE BIG KNIFE

1955, MGM Home Entertainment, DD-1.0/ST/CC/+, \$19.98, 113m 33s, DVD-1

By Rebecca & Sam Umland

Based on Clifford Odets' 1949 Broadway play, **THE BIG KNIFE** was the film Robert Aldrich made immediately following the commercial success of **KISS ME DEADLY** (1955). It was also the first film made under the banner of his own production company, The Associates and Aldrich. Like his later films, such as **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?** (1962), **THE LEGEND OF LYLAH CLARE** (1968), and **THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE** (1968; VW 64:50), **THE BIG KNIFE** is a scathing behind-the-scenes look at the movie business. Charlie Castle, née Cass (Jack Palance), is a famous movie star who has become disenchanted with his Hollywood career. He is weary of making lousy films that betray his once lauded talent. He therefore wishes not to renew his contract with Stanley Hoff (Rod Steiger), a tyrannical studio boss. Charlie's desire to quit show business is also encouraged by his estranged wife, Marion (Ida Lupino), who is fed up with his infidelities and the betrayal of his noble goals, and

threatens to leave him if he renews his contract with Hoff. When Charlie expresses his reluctance to re-sign, Hoff turns to blackmail, threatening to expose the covered-up secret from years before when the drunken Charlie, accompanied by the aspiring starlet Dixie Evans (Shelley Winters), had struck and killed a child in a hit-and-run accident. Charlie's friend, Buddy Bliss (**THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN**'s Paul Langton), took the rap and served a prison sentence, and to make matters worse, Charlie

finds himself enmeshed in a sado-masochistic affair with Buddy's feckless wife, Connie (Jean Hagen).

Hoff is an extremely sinister figure, part mob-boss (Charlie kneels before him) and part tyrant (indicated by the drum roll always associated with his presence). Critics have speculated that Hoff is an amalgam of Senator Joe McCarthy and studio boss Jack Warner. Although he realizes the utter ignominy of his decision, Charlie nonetheless succumbs to the pressure and signs the contract. Soon after,

however, Charlie learns from Hoff's assistant Smiley Coy (Wendell Corey, in a superbly slimy performance) that Dixie Evans is threatening to spill the beans about the accident to get back at Hoff for her failed career, and that Coy—with or without Hoff's consent—is planning to murder her. Faced with this latest revelation, Charlie realizes he must act quickly in order to redeem himself.

Distantly related to **THE BIG KNIFE** is Shakespeare's tragedy **MACBETH**, whose title character also realizes with horror that he has mired himself so deeply in blood and corruption that the only way out is one last, futile act of redemption. (In fact, Charlie and Marion consciously invoke Shakespeare's tragedy.) The film, which rarely strays from the Castle's living room, betrays its theatrical origins, and despite its timely indictment of a corrupt Hollywood studio system, this highly compelling film reaches the heights of high tragedy, precisely because Charlie chooses to right the wrong in a heroic act of self-sacrifice. Aldrich himself insisted that Charlie's final act is a gesture of revolt, and that Charlie's last action represents the "height of moral integrity." Ironically, as Marion mourns his supreme sacrifice, Smiley issues a press release stating that Charlie has died of a "heart attack," adding to the earlier irony that Dixie was killed accidentally by a bus. Although the film is anti-Hollywood, its central figure and his story achieve a mythic dimension.

MGM's disc presents the B&W film in its original Academy standard ratio (1.33:1) with an acceptable DD-1.0 soundtrack confined to the center channel. The disc's replication of the film's stark, expressionistic photography (by Ernest Laszlo, destined



to shoot **THE SPACE CHILDREN** and **ATTACK OF THE PUPPET PEOPLE** just a few years later) is excellent, with the source materials showing minimal speckling. Subtitles are available in English, French, and Spanish. The disc's 16 chapters are a bit skimpy given the film's length, and the original 2m 28s trailer is the disc's sole supplement.

HITCH-HIKE

Autostop rosso sangue

"Hitchhike: Red Blood"

1978, Anchor Bay Entertainment, DD-2.0/16:9/LB/+, \$19.98, 103m 48s, DVD-0

By Richard Harland Smith

Towing a camper across the American Southwest, vacationing *giornalista* Walter Mancini (Franco Nero) berates and brutalizes his wife Eve (Corinne Clery), whom he resents for holding the purse strings in their nine-year marriage. When Eve defies her husband by picking

up a hitchhiker, talkative grad student Adam Konitz (uh-oh: David Hess) reveals himself to be an escaped mental patient wanted by the California State Police for robbery and murder. Although Adam has designs on the alluring Eve ("the girl with the gilded ass"), his first proposition is to the dissolute Walter, to whom he offers \$100,000 to transcribe his true crime autobiography. Walter reluctantly agrees to ghost-author Adam's "sexy outtasight story," but when he isn't tape recording Adam's rambling testimonials, Walter finds himself hog-tied and forced to watch as the fugitive rapes his wife—a physical violation that Eve seems to welcome as a change from Walter's brand of mental cruelty. Meanwhile, Adam's partners, whom he has cheated of their split of a \$2 million payroll heist, are in close pursuit.

HITCH-HIKE seems aware of its place at the end of the cycle of '70s Italian action films and burns with a thwarted machismo raging against a world that has rendered it redundant. "I'm all dried out," laments Franco Nero's dissipated journalist, caricatured by his captor as "a two-bit reporter living off his wife's money." When Eve dismisses her husband's talents as "minor-league" and Walter tags Adam a "cheap killer," the characters betray their shared obsession with devaluation as a detriment to free exchange. Director Pasquale Festa Campanile (**WHEN WOMEN HAD TAILS**) and co-scenarists Aldo Crudo (**BEYOND THE DOOR**) and Ottavio Jemma (who wrote Campanile's sex farce **THE LIBERTINE**) reference such classic studies of devalued machismo as Polanski's **KNIFE IN THE WATER** and Peckinpah's **STRAW DOGS**. (Even Spielberg's **DUEL** is

All-American boy David Hess thumbs a ride in Pasquale Festa Campanile's HITCH-HIKE.



echoed, during a suspense set piece in which Walter and Eve are menaced by a careering dump truck). The film also recalls such stuck-in-the-car thrillers as Ida Lupino's **THE HITCH-HIKER** and Mario Bava's **RABID DOGS**, while looking ahead to the media-friendly pathology of **MAN BITES DOG** and **NATURAL BORN KILLERS**. **HITCH-HIKE**'s most obvious precursor, however, is **Ossessione** (1942, reviewed VW 96:64), Luchino Visconti's neorealist spin on THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE; Visconti's take on James M. Cain's 1932 source novel was more radical than the Hollywood versions of 1946 and 1981, but also more faithful to Cain's subtheme of the economics that underwrite passion and murder.

HITCH-HIKE distinguishes itself from its influences with an intriguing exchange occurring late in the film. When Walter suggests that men and women are splitting into separate camps, and that "only homosexuals know what real love is anymore," the film coyly acknowledges the assumed homoeroticism at the heart of dramas about men locked in a life or death struggle for dominance. (A decade later, Robert Harmon's **THE HITCHER** pitted fortyish Rutger Hauer against twenty-something C. Thomas Howell in a protracted *mano a mano* that some critics felt was a recruiting film for NAMBLA.) The decision to make Adam's disgruntled partners a gay couple brings the equation full circle; although the "inseparable fags" played by Gianni Loffredo (**KEOMA**) and Carlo Puri are drawn as broadly as were the mincing highwaymen of Richard

C. Sarafian's **VANISHING POINT**, they prove to be the film's only loving couple. It's a shame this subtheme goes undeveloped, but **HITCH-HIKE** keeps its surprises nicely paced and its cynical climax packs a wallop. Franco Nero turns in a remarkable performance that manages to be both bombastic and selfless, while Corinne Clery (**THE STORY OF O**'s "it" girl) handles several difficult sexual situations with courage and class. David Hess resorts to his usual sweaty *schtick*, but Campanile does a better job of keeping the actor in check than did Wes Craven or Ruggero Deodato, who used Hess as the party guest from hell in **THE HOUSE ON THE EDGE OF THE PARK**.

This obscure and all-but-forgotten Euro production has been given an exceptional transfer by Anchor Bay that ranks as one of their most impressive (especially for a picture that takes place in a sun-baked desert setting, where vivid chromatics are at a premium). Letterboxed at 1.85:1 and 16:9-enhanced for widescreen TVs, the image is sharp, clear and colorful, with contrasts and black levels (especially during a number of night scenes) agreeably deep. (Campanile employed two cinematographers: Franco Di Giacomo, who graduated from work as a cameraman on Sergio Leone's **THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY** to DP on Bernardo Bertolucci's **THE SPIDER'S STRATAGEM** and Dario Argento's **FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET**, and Giuseppe Ruzzolini, who shot Leone's **DUCK, YOU SUCKER** and **BURN!** for Gillo Pontecorvo). No complaints about the mono soundtrack

(in English only), which is well-balanced and noise-free.

Grey market dupes of **HITCH-HIKE** tend to be standard framed, are missing as much as 10m of footage, and are often culled from tape sources using less explicit alternate takes of the film's campfire sex scene (in which leaping flames obscured much of the action). Anchor Bay has restored the film to its proper running time of 103m, including the more censorable moments; this version also includes the film's original *molto* cynical ending (as opposed to the equally downbeat, but more ironic coda seen in some variants). The disc has been given 25 chapters, listed on a stiff cardboard insert whose flipside is illustrated with original Italian poster art (which depicts Nero holding a Tommy gun!).

Extras include a letterboxed 2m 58s trailer and an informative making-of featurette, "The Devil Thumbs A Ride" (17m 36s). Franco Nero speaks warmly of the late Campanile (who preferred writing academic books on art history to filmmaking) and relates how an accident while filming **KEOMA** required him to spend the majority of **HITCH-HIKE** with one hand in a bandage; Nero also identifies the Italian locations used to shemp the American southwest. Corinne Clery recalls early tension on the set with Nero, whom she eventually came to adore, and a graying and (given his hyperbolic stock-in-trade) surprisingly mellow David Hess (who had worked with Nero previously in the 1976 telefilm 21 HOURS TO MUNICH) declares "If you can't have meriment on an Italian set, then you might as well not go."



Troubled teen Ken Clayton finds solace in the arms of good girl Barbara Wilson in Something Weird's LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS.

LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS / JACKTOWN

1957/1961, *Something Weird*
Video, DD-1.0/+, \$19.98,
72m 26s/57m 52s, DVD-0
By Richard Harland Smith

Wayward youth is the tie that binds this *Something Weird* double feature. In the Hollywood-set (but Alabama-shot) **LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS**, sudden fame has teen idol John Dennis (Ken Clayton) feeling like he's "suspended in space." Spurning his cultured drama coach Tanya (Lilyan Chauvin, later the harsh Mother Superior of **SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT**) and aggravating the jealousy of Hollywood hopeful Walt (Richard Gilden), the death-obsessed

John finds solace in the arms of "nice kid" Helen (**TERROR IN THE MIDNIGHT SUN**'s Barbara Wilson). After his face is smashed in a fist fight with Walt, John pens a farewell love note to Helen before pointing his T-Bird into the night to pony up with fate.

THE BAD SEED's Patty McCormack is top-billed in **JACKTOWN**, but doesn't appear until halfway through. When 21-year-old hood Frankie (Richard Meade) is convicted of statutory rape for bagging an underage carhop, he winds up in Michigan State Prison, "the world's largest penal institution." Branded a "rape artist," Frankie suffers the contempt of his fellow inmates. The love of a reform warden's virginal daughter inspires Frankie

to dream of a life of freedom—and he gets his shot after escaping custody during a bloody prisoner transfer.

Both of these barely feature-length productions would need extensive reworking to qualify even as B-films, but they are not without charm. **LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS** presents itself as a "realistic documentary" about the plight of kids lured away from hearth and home with the promise of stardom, but it's really a highly fictionalized recreation of the last days of James Dean (barely in the ground a year before cameras rolled on this Howco International release). Leads Clayton and Wilson are passable performers and the Garboesque Lilyan Chauvin is a

hoot as the lovelorn other woman (who haunts the malt shops in an outfit that makes her look like the Gorton's fisherman), but given its HOLLYWOOD BABYLON agenda, **LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS** should have been a lot more fun. Not even an hour long (despite being breaded with newsreel footage of a 1952 prison riot), **JACKTOWN** plays like an industrial reel for the Michigan State penal system, even going so far as to cite the rapid response time (58s) of the Detroit police department. "Miss Patty McCormack" (as she is billed) is sweet as the tenderhearted Margaret ("I don't know what it's like to be with a man"), but **JACKTOWN** is bland in the extreme (interiors look to have been filmed inside model homes) and plays out like a lesser episode of the syndicated inspirational series *INSIGHT*; when McCormack agrees to drive her contrite leading man back to stir in the final frames, one half expects her to pull up in front of a Paulist church.

For regional films shot on the cheap in B&W, both **LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS** and **JACKTOWN** look very fine in this SWV two-fer. Both are presented in standard mode (which feels appropriate) and the mono sound betrays only isolated moments of ambient hiss. **LOST** shows its grain in some brightly-lit interiors, but black levels are very nice (particularly in a scene of a moonlight swim); **JACKTOWN**, on the other hand, gleams like high crime from start to finish. Both transfers are beset by only infrequent frame damage (**LOST** sports the mother of all emulsion burns at 54m 50s). The abundance of location shooting on both films affords great views of vintage architecture and automobile design (attention stock footage

collectors). **LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS** has been divided into 10 chapters (or "altercations"), while the shorter **JACKTOWN** merits 16 "crimes." Something Weird's menu screens just get better and better.

If the double feature itself feels a little light, SWV has rounded out its assortment of extras with over an hour of bonus material. Trailers for **LOST, LONELY AND VICIOUS** (1m 39s) and **JACKTOWN** (2m 15s) are accompanied by previews for such "turbulent teenage temptations" as **THE COOL AND THE CRAZY** ("Hepcats Living Too Fast"), **CRY BABY KILLER** (Jack Nicholson made his screen debut in this "All Out Exposure of the Jazz Beat Generation"), **EIGHTEEN AND ANXIOUS** ("...with Jim Backus in a shocking new role!"), **JOYRIDE** ("Outrage Becomes A Driving Passion") and the German import **TEEN-AGE WOLFPACK**, starring Horst Bucholz ("Nothing like him since James Dean").

In addition to the expected "Gallery of Exploitation Art" (shorter than usual at 4m 5s, but proud in promos for JD films, martial arts programmers, biker flicks and obscure blaxploitation) are three "Sinful, Sordid, Startling Short Subjects." The first, "Crisis in Morality" (26m 5s), is an apocalyptic harangue focusing on the moral decay of those who would rather frequent cocktail lounges than churches. The featurette (circa 1958-9) cites the rise in juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, divorce, drug and alcohol abuse and the upswing in the use of profanity ("even in the highest social circles") as symptoms of "sin in the human heart," and even broaches the again-timely topic of prayer in public schools ("God has become unconstitutional"). No surprise that the road to "right living"

rolls right up to the front gates of The Bible Institute of Los Angeles' "Biola" University.

In "Hell Is A Place Called Hollywood" (19m 54s), a '40s-era beauty pageant contestant wins a free trip to Tinsel Town, only to wind up posing for cheesecake calendars and bondage scenes. Financed by the National Film Board of Canada in cooperation with Toronto's controversial Warrendale halfway house for troubled teens, "Little Miss Delinquent" (27m 29s) attends the meltdown of an average teenage girl on the cusp of womanhood. The real-life Warrendale (whose take on "tough love" raised cries of child abuse) was the subject of a 1967 documentary by filmmaker Allan King, and so upset the Canadian Broadcast Corporation that the film (which was praised by Jean Renoir and won a raft of festival prizes) was banned in its own country for 30 years. All three shorts are in somewhat punk condition ("Hell" suffers from so much speckling that some of the characters appear to be crawling with lice), but watchable.

So go on. Watch.

MACBETH

1971, Columbia Pictures,
DD-2.0/16:9/LB/CC/+,
\$29.95, 140m 4s, DVD-1
By Kim Newman

The release of **THE PIANIST**, Roman Polanski's finest film in decades, makes this a propitious time to re-evaluate his earlier work. This adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy—produced by Hugh Hefner's Playboy Productions, back when their ambitions ran higher than made-for-cable softcore—was initially considered, like **THE PIANIST**, as informed by the grimmest of the director's personal experiences.

His first film after **ROSEMARY'S BABY** (1968), in which another marriage is wrecked by a witch cult, and the Manson murders, **MACBETH** works up a real bitterness about the thorough rottenness of its characters, as individuals and representatives of a society gone mad. The murders of MacDuff's wife and children (and household), usually an aside to the main plot, are especially affecting: like Manson, Macbeth isn't even present at the greatest atrocity of his career, from his point of view a minor bit of business.

For Orson Welles and Akira Kurosawa (in **THRONE OF BLOOD**), Macbeth is a strong man gone wrong, but Polanski has Jon Finch (then fresh from a batch of Hammer horrors) play the Thane-turned-King as a contemptible weakling who acts on his ambitions but blames the prophecies and his wife for the messiness of his progress, and spends the last act in a funk even though he believes himself to be invincible. By contrast, the rebel Cawdor, whose title and estates

Macbeth wins as a reward for a loyalty he instantly abandons, goes bravely in the opening sequence to his gruesome execution, stepping off a castle wall to be hanged with chain. Unlike many others who have tackled this material, Polanski gives some thought to how Macbeth's rule affects a kingdom already troubled by rebellion, and the way that his doom is sealed when he realises that only villains support his cause and all the good, even all the competent, noblemen have gone over to his enemies. Most of Polanski's films end as they began, and this amends Shakespeare to finish with the new King Donalbain (Paul Shelley—who took the home movie footage of his brother Francis Matthews included on the DVD of **DRACULA, PRINCE OF DARKNESS**) on the beach where the witches lurk, preparing to consult with them and perpetuate the cycle of prophecy, violence and corruption.

Following Zeffirelli's teenage-themed **ROMEO AND JULIET**, though with a very different tone,

this gives the leads to younger, less starry actors than usual. A few passages have to be pruned to justify this, though the important plot point that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Francesca Annis) haven't had children yet, but hope to, supports the casting decision. At the time, a deal of fuss was made over Annis' discreet nude sleepwalking, and the fact that Polanski and co-writer Kenneth Tynan had to remove the information that the Macbeths don't sleep in the nude (in the original, they change into nightclothes after murder) suggests a certain opportunism. However, the non-prurient direction of the scene indicates this was at least partially an attempt to make this Lady Macbeth more vulnerable, less culpable than the forty-something *grande dame* who usually gets the role. For Polanski, the nagging of Lady Macbeth is no excuse for her husband, and the difficult transition from ambitious shrew and equal villain to suicidal neurotic is lessened by Annis' reading of the woman as frail and jittery ("it

Ambitious Lady Macbeth (Francesca Annis) whispers unholy advice into the ear of her husband (Jon Finch) in Roman Polanski's ultraviolent MACBETH.



was the owl that shrieked”) from the outset. In the United Kingdom, the subsequent prominence as an irritating children’s entertainer of Keith Chegwin, the child actor cast as Banquo’s son Fleance, renders his scenes hard to take, though TV hardman Martin Shaw (*THE PROFESSIONALS*) does well as sidekick-cum-victim-cum-accusing-spectre Banquo.

The depiction of a castle complete with livestock and general filth owes a little to Peter Brook’s film of **KING LEAR**, but also looks forward to the more comical approach of Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam in **MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL** and others. Though some have compared the film’s look to a Hammer production, Polanski’s take on that style in **DANCE OF THE VAMPIRES** [*US: THE FEARLESS VAMPIRE KILLERS*, 1967] highlighted delicately-coloured fairytale prettiness; this strikes me as looking more like a Michael Reeves movie, or even the early-’70s vogue for mud-and-gore “realism” in Westerns (**BAD COMPANY**, **DIRTY LITTLE BILLY**, etc.). Few productions of Macbeth have dwelled as effectively on the climate of fear in the kingdom, with characters always (justifiably) suspecting that they are liable to be betrayed and murdered, and forever keeping an eye on the shifting balance of power that might imperil them or their heirs. After Duncan’s murder, his sons immediately flee to escape possible death and thus make themselves prime suspects in the killing, while entertainment at Dunsinane runs to bear-baiting and dog-fighting, leaving yet more gory corpses lying about. This is a world in which it seems entirely likely that the characters Shakespeare

describes as First and Second Murderer (**REVENGE OF BILLY THE KID**’s Michael Balfour and **NOTHING BUT THE NIGHT**’s Andrew McCulloch) could find regular employment. An inspired touch is having things at Dunsinane Castle fall apart, just as Carol’s flat becomes a tip in **REPULSION**, so that Lady Macbeth’s broken corpse lies strewn under a blue blanket all through the climax in which Macbeth duels with MacDuff (Terence Bayler, “the Bloody Baron” of the **HARRY POTTER** films) in a sprawling, messy, brutal, dirty fight (choreographed by **CAPTAIN KRONOS**, **VAMPIRE HUNTER**’s William Hobbs).

Columbia’s widescreen DVD has an aspect ratio of approximately 2.32:1 and is given 28 chapter stops. The “remastered in high definition” transfer has a certain degree of grain—though it should perhaps be called “texture” since Polanski and DP Gil Taylor evidently sought a rough, hand-hewn look to match the crude, inelegant-but-convincing action of the fight scenes. In any case, this transfer—an enormous improvement on the murky pan&scans previously available—shows in its occasional strong hues (mostly dramatic skies, though Annis is first seen in a lovely aquamarine dress) that the muted, battered look of the sets, costumes and locations is deliberate (as in most productions, Duncan’s “this castle hath a pleasant seat” speech has to be taken as an indication of the King’s lack of perceptivity). A vertical scratch and some light speckling are noticeable in the opening reel, though this clears up soon after the opening titles. The mono sound is surprisingly rich—many scenes make use of

voiceovers (as a way of handling the soliloquies) or offscreen animal noises or howls of grief and pain. The only extras are trailers for the film and, oddly, **SENSE AND SENSIBILITY**.

PSYCH-OUT / THE TRIP

1968/1967, MGM Home Entertainment, DD-2.0/MA/16:9/LB/ST/CC/+ \$14.95, 89m 19s/79m 13s, DVD-1
By Charlie Largent

Roger Corman’s baroque thrillers from the early 1960s, particularly the ones inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, might beg a question or two about the director’s other source of inspiration... to be blunt, “What was this guy on?” During the credits of films like **FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER** (1960) and **PIT AND THE PENDULUM** (1961), the names of Vincent Price & Company are suspended over blazing pools of oozing, swirling color—Spin-Art from Hell. These abstract... alright, *trippy* sequences are really at odds with the stately demeanor of the films they introduce, but to Corman, who routinely describes these widescreen gothics as explorations into the unconscious mind, the kaleidoscopic credits could be seen as his first attempt to visualize the ebb and flow of a tortured imagination. What was this guy on? He was high on movies. For the moment.

When Corman tired of shooting through cobwebs, he shifted his attentions to the present day, circa 1963. In **X-THE MAN WITH X-RAY EYES**, Ray Milland plays Dr. Xavier who experiments with a drug that will expand the power of his eyesight to superhuman levels. He succeeds... during a critical operation he sees through the skin and bones of a little girl’s



VW reader, you have just been dosed with what Warren's having. And Warren's freaking out at the gallery. What you think you are seeing is actually Jack Nicholson and the other cast members of PSYCH-OUT. Put the handsaw down.

chest like the translucent wings of a butterfly. But with each dose of that drug, he becomes more addicted, winding up with an all-seeing monkey on his back. **X**, in effect, becomes an unofficial sequel to Milland's most famous film; this is Roger Corman's swingin' **LOST WEEKEND** starring a hooked hero who can't keep his hands off the medicine bottle. Embodied by Ray Milland's perennial bad mood, Corman's fable is the tale of a bored businessman: a guy who wants to see more just because he's sick and tired of staring at the same goddamn thing, day in and day out. The director could sympathize. Averse to boredom himself, Roger Corman wanted to see a lot more. He certainly would—and with one dilated pupil always on the bottom line.

At the beginning of **THE TRIP**, Paul Groves (Peter Fonda), agonizing over his divorce from Sally (played by a beautiful and somber Susan Strasberg), is

directing a TV commercial on a California beach. The banal surfside antics of the actors seem to mock Paul's own disintegrating marriage and he's ready for a quick vacation—one he can take without leaving his house. A friend and part-time pharmacological guru, played by Bruce Dern, has a quick get-away plan: LSD. Just as quickly, Paul is camped out in the Hollywood Hills, ready for lift off. Twelve minutes into the movie, Paul pops a pill into his mouth and most of the remaining 67m of **THE TRIP** take place in his head; 67m of druggy chaos. If AIP was worried about such a radical approach from their most reliable source of drive-in ticket sales, they needn't. Roger Corman the business man was on the set at the same time as Roger Corman the trippy director.

The genesis of **THE TRIP**'s trip is as idiosyncratic as the characters involved. Chuck Griffith turned in a first draft that

was over 300 pages, a script beyond the pale of AIP's budget. Corman rejected it. Griffith then suggested a version with musical interludes—a rock-musical that would pre-date **TOMMY**. Corman balked at these ideas, too, and turned to Jack Nicholson for a complete rewrite. Working on a three-week shooting schedule, Corman was in complete control of the druggy tableaux dreamed up by Nicholson. Maybe too controlled. Paul's hallucinations, visions that should appear spontaneous, suffer from micro-management. Compared to other Hollywood hallucinations, Paul's trip (made up of banal surrealist imagery apparently ripped from the side of David Crosby's van) comes up very short on imagination; certainly Bunuel's work in **THE AGE OF GOLD** was more disturbing. Hitchcock's labored partnership with Salvador Dali in **SPELLBOUND** was more fun. Even the visions of Hell in



*Searching for Godliness, acid-head Peter Fonda instinctively rushes to the Temple of Cleanliness in Roger Corman's **THE TRIP**.*

DANTE'S INFERNO (1935) have a kitschy glamour. For better and worse, those sequences left us room to imagine. Fonda's visions, on the other hand, are so pragmatic they dull the senses rather than exciting them. Corman cut many of Nicholson's more hallucinatory set-pieces and those cuts actually may have been for the best. Corman is most successful when his own conflicted impulses are up front, in the contrast between Paul's stoned state of mind and the straight folks he encounters. His visit to a late night laundromat is the best moment of his trip (and the film). In a scene reminiscent of the bone-dry satire of Nichols and May, Paul finds cosmic pleasure in the spin cycle of a washing machine while a woman in curlers (**A BUCKET OF BLOOD**'s Barboura Morris) offers the pragmatic view of a bored realist. Corman convinces us that they're both right.

THE TRIP doesn't succeed in translating the adventures of

a bona-fide day tripper into film, but it remains an essential document of the psychedelic Sixties for more down-to-earth reasons. Peter Fonda's work is graceful and unmannered; a touching reminder of his father's naïve millionaire in **THE LADY EVE**. Dern's low-key, ursine flight attendant and Dennis Hopper's goofball stoner are both refreshingly free of caricature. Not surprisingly, the oozing colors of Corman's early Poe films make a successful leap into full-fledged psychedelia. They've been streamlined, too; no longer soft and swirling, they're hard-edged and throbbing, illuminating and, at the same time, concealing, the naked actors copulating to the music of the Electric Flag. Future cinematographer Allen Daviau (**E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL**) helped design these effects, inspired by the grandiose light shows of Bill Graham's glory days. A year later, Stanley Kubrick put these same light

shows on steroids... but with much the same intent. The incandescent finale of **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY** would have been even more sublime with Susan Strasberg taking her rightful place in the constellation, undulating with the Star Child under a blanket of bustling lights.

It's clear that Corman is excited by his subject, but he's (typically) cautious in his approach to the drug scene; he's got a businessman on his back. This movie is a bungee jump to the center of the mind rather than a lingering immersion—maybe because he had already taken a more meaningful trip with **X**. The gritty fantasy-*noir* of that film freed him in a way that the more realistic **THE TRIP** could not. (Who wouldn't enjoy seeing Don Rickles walk in on just one of Peter Fonda's sanctimonious visions?) Perhaps Corman identified more with Milland's less recreational approach to mind expansion?

THE TRIP is successful in one respect; it brings Roger Corman's split-level consciousness into sharp focus; he's a budget-minded hedonist flying coach to join the mile-high club.

AIP was high on profits. One year after **THE TRIP**, which became one of their most successful films, they released **PSYCH-OUT**, a Dick Clark production shot in Los Angeles and San Francisco and directed by Richard Rush (**HELL'S ANGELS ON WHEELS**). Susan Strasberg plays Jenny, a young deaf woman looking for her brother (a street messiah played by Bruce Dern) in the Haight-Ashbury district—ground zero for the counterculture in 1968. The movie might seem, at first, as aimless as its characters, a documentary with no subject, but the ramshackle quality of the plot becomes part of its point. Jenny is befriended by the members of a rock band (including Jack Nicholson, whose original rejected screenplay *LOVE AND MONEY* was the genesis of this project) and their relationships form the pretext of the film: the diary of a flower child in training. Strasberg holds this loosely plotted film together, her vulnerable but aloof persona begs our help even as she rejects it. Strasberg had the reserve of a privileged princess and not just because of her pedigree (her father was the legendary acting teacher, Lee Strasberg); she exists in an imperious bubble, an invisible wall between herself and the rabble. In **PSYCH-OUT**, her deafness stands in for that invisible wall; she is as alone on the streets of San Francisco as that other dislocated princess, Audrey Hepburn, was in **ROMAN HOLIDAY**. Her relationship

with the ambitious Stoney (Nicholson), throws off some genuinely prickly heat. Nicholson is a quick-tempered bull set loose in Strasberg's fragile china shop... a character he seemed to build piece by piece throughout the Sixties. Each of his early films contain hints and sketchy notions of the fully formed Jack that finally touched down in **EASY RIDER** (1969). In **PSYCH-OUT**, he shows remarkable assurance, already warming up the rants that would explode into the petulant, misogynist hysterics of Jonathan Fuerst in **CARNAL KNOWLEDGE** and stoking the doomed bravado of J.J. Gittes in **CHINATOWN**. In **PSYCH-OUT**, he looks as comfortable pawing at a guitar as he was wearing a plumed hat in **THE RAVEN**, but this is as close to "Jack Nicholson" as Nicholson gets—until he helped Fonda and Hopper look for America one year later.

The film has a dazed quality that, fortunately, adds up to more than just my nostalgia for beaded curtains, incense and Zap Comix. Rush's work is a forerunner to the stoned dreamscapes of Robert Altman's great films of the 1970s (the busy soundtrack and Laszlo Kovacs' prowling camera puts the Avalon Ballroom a little closer to **NASHVILLE**). Pungent music from the Seeds and Strawberry Alarm Clock burns our nostrils until the abrupt reminder from Dick Clark that this is indeed his production and the youngsters need a lesson or two. That's when the needle, both phonographic and pharmaceutical, begins to invoke the sinister mood of "White Rabbit" and bad (read "cautionary") trips start popping up with the regularity of the Times Square ball hitting on New Year's Rockin' Eve. These

trips come with some great macabre imagery (Henry Jaglom's splendid freak-out features some truly spooky zombies—maybe the screen's first truly Romero-like living dead) and Jenny has a flashback to a childhood trauma that David Lynch would admire. In spite of the tiresome moralizing of Clark, Rush maintains an even-handed approach. To what would have been William Bennett's everlasting distress, drugs—in this film—ain't all bad: as Elwood, the third member of Nicholson's band, Max Julien has hallucinations that actually inspire him. He turns into a heroic figure, imagining himself as a knight in shining armor that allows him to dispatch a vicious gang attack with the skill of a kung-fu master—all the while as high as a kite. As opposed to **THE TRIP**, this movie makes good on its hallucinations.

AIP directed Rush to go and make an exploitation movie about a passing phase: hippies. Instead, Rush turned in a bitter-sweet valentine to another passing phase: youth. Rush extols the pleasures of casual sex, drugs and rock and roll but concludes his film with a very bad trip, which allows the end credits to roll by like a somber litany for the cast. There's the whiff of classroom scare-films about these final moments, but the integrity and good will of the filmmakers and actors keep these final moments from toppling into parody. Watch the delicate, tortured Susan Strasberg run for her life through the gauntlet of an STP trip at the end of this film, and **REEFER MADNESS** will be the last thing on your mind.

MGM's "Midnite Movies" double-feature DVD of **PSYCH-OUT/ THE TRIP** is an excellent release with generous extra

material. The DVD is a “flipper” presenting each film on its own side. Keeping in mind that both of these films are *very* low-budget productions, these are fine transfers. There is some very natural grain to the image in both films (probably not noticeable in the drive-ins in 1967) but the colors are right-on... subtle and warm in the natural light sequences, and juicy and ripe when those colored lights at the Ballroom begin to throb.

Each film is accompanied by its own “Making Of” documentary, both directed by Greg Carson. *LOVE & HAIGHT* (19m 14s) brings together Dick Clark, Bruce Dern, Richard Rush and cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs to talk about the genesis of **PSYCH-OUT** and the challenges they faced bringing it to the screen. *TUNE IN, TRIP OUT* (17m 5s) features Roger Corman, Allen Daviau and Dern in a similarly constructed documentary about the making of **THE TRIP**. Corman goes into further detail about his own, actual LSD experience in Big Sur and Dern describes, very entertainingly yet with great conviction, his own trepidations about the drug culture. Allen Daviau expounds upon the technical problems of shooting giant, pulsating masses of color. Each of these docs give an enjoyable, though brief, overview of both the films and the times in which they were made.

There are a few more extras for **THE TRIP**. Corman provides a pleasing, though slightly laconic, audio commentary. There's a short piece with Daviau called **ALLEN DAVIAU ASC ON PSYCHEDELIC FILM EFFECTS** (7m 50s) that sounds like a technical brief but is, in fact, an enjoyable piece with Daviau describing the “learn-as-you-go” environment

in which these bizarre lighting effects were conceived. (**THE TRIP** was Daviau's very first screen credit.) The disc also includes something called a “Psychedelic Light Box” which is simply a visual and audio loop of Daviau's throbbing lighting effects, set to stereo music from the soundtrack by The American Music Band (which featured the talents of Mike Bloomfield and Buddy Miles and almost immediately rechristened themselves The Electric Flag). The last extra is an excerpt from a 1967 issue of *AMERICAN CINEMATOGRAPHER* about the cinematography for **THE TRIP**. Both sides feature the theatrical trailer for the films, with **PSYCH-OUT**'s being especially interesting for including deleted footage of Strasberg modelling hippie garb at a free clothing store. English, French and Spanish subtitles are optional.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

1979, *Blue Underground*,
DD-2.0/16:9/LB/+, \$24.99,
98m 2s, DVD-0

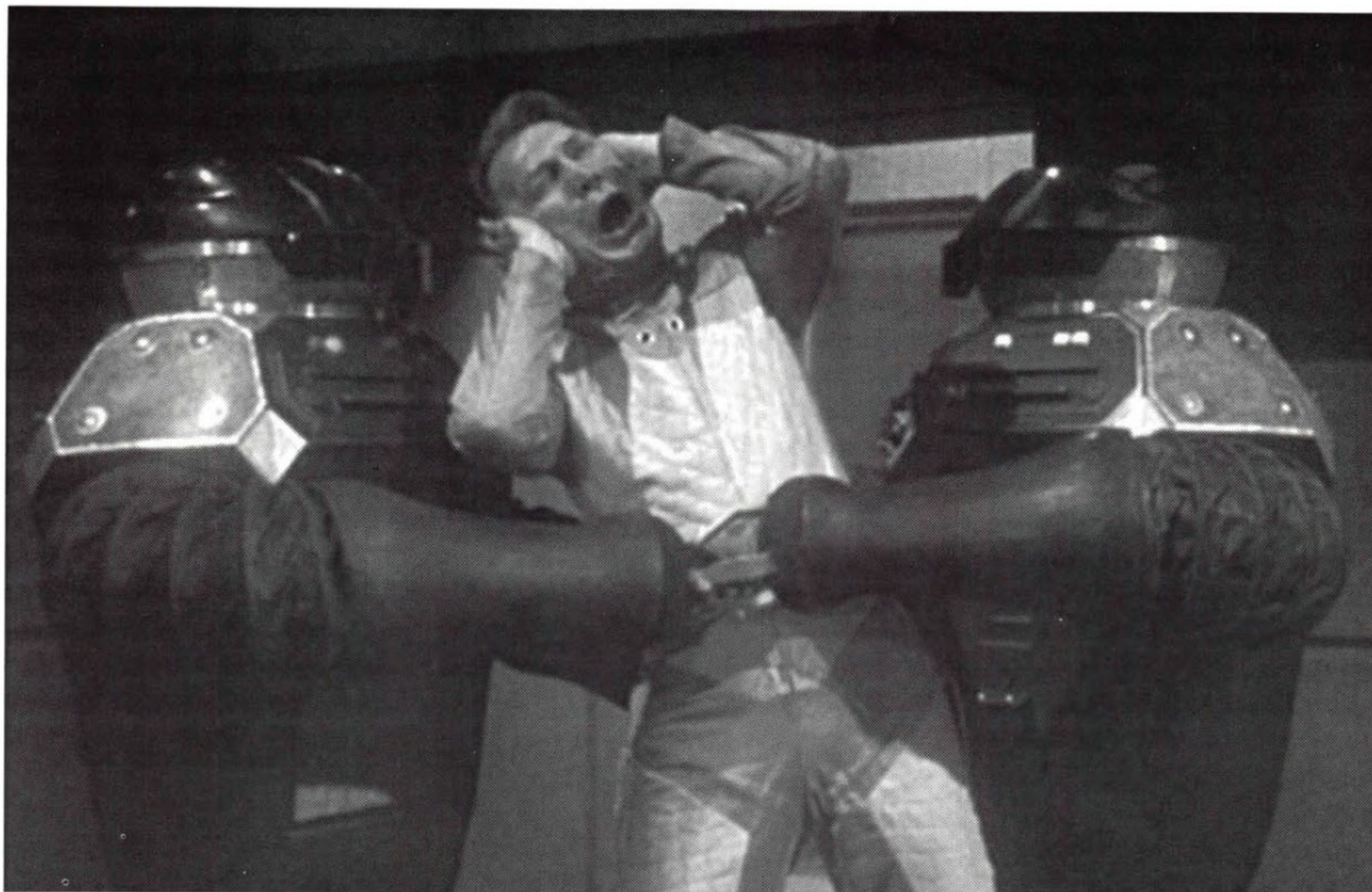
By Bill Cooke

“The time is the tomorrow after tomorrow...” Who needs specific dates, anyway? It's the future, Baby! Earth has been polluted and devastated by the Great Robot Wars, sending the survivors of a technocratic society to the moon, where new cities have been raised beneath sprawling glass domes.

“This is Washington...New Washington,” the capital moon city. But before we can ponder too long over why there are blue skies and fluffy clouds on the moon, or how the colonists went about renaming New York, a plastic spaceship piloted by a

suicide robot smashes into the city. A calling card of Omus the Master of the Robots (legendary screen heavy Jack Palance), the ship-cum-missile hailed from the distant planet Delta Three where His Sneeriness has seized the solar system's sole supply of RADIC-Q-2, a miracle drug that humans apparently need to stave off radiation poisoning. While Senator Smedley (John Ireland) waffles on what to do, aging scientist Dr. Caball (Barry Morse) and his space-jockey son Jason (Nicholas Campbell, soon to be the serial killer of Cronenberg's **THE DEAD ZONE**) blast off in their untested starship, the Star Streak, to rescue Delta Three's overthrown leader (seventies TV icon Carol Lynley) and somehow defeat Omus and his army of automatons. Aiding them in the quest is Kim (**THE BOOGENS'** Anne-Marie Martin, under her alias “Eddie Benton”), the token girl scientist in spandex, and Sparks, her “lovable” sidekick robot that is prone to annoying both cast and audience with unfunny jokes and quotes from classic literature.

This completely mad Canadian space “spectacle” purports to be based on the novel by H.G. Wells (previously filmed as **THINGS TO COME** in 1936), but has even less to do with Wells than those other low-budget “adaptations” of the late-'70s sci-fi boom, **THE FOOD OF THE GODS** (1976) and **EMPIRE OF THE ANTS** (1977). Clearly made to cash in on the success of **STAR WARS** (1977), the Harry Alan Towers production distills space opera clichés that George Lucas himself ripped from the Saturday matinee serials of yesteryear (inter-planetary jaunts, a cloaked villain in an impenetrable fortress, ray-gun shoot-outs),



*A sublime Jack Palance moment as producer Harry Alan Towers tackles thought-provoking science fiction in **THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME**.*

only it has less production values than your typical episode of **BUCK ROGERS IN THE 25th CENTURY** and lacks the verve that this sort of material needs to shine. (For a fun **STAR WARS** clone, try Kenji Fukasaku's delirious **MES-SAGE FROM SPACE**, [*Uchu kara no messeji*, 1978].) Predictably, the movie cribbs **STAR WARS'** opening shot of a colossal spacecraft passing overhead (to be fair, Lucas cribbed it himself, from Kubrick's **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY**), only here the models never achieve an illusion of size and have the look of being cobbled together from various hobby kits. The interior *mise en scène* is your typically desperate low-budget *mélange* of painted cardboard, airport corridors and industrial parks, while exteriors for various planets all have the same rural Ontario backdrop (and the same season as well: fall). There is no rhyme

or reason to the costume design (our heroes strut about in tailored uniforms, while extras run around in anything and everything) and the tacky robot suits are strictly of the flailing duct-arm variety. In perhaps the film's most audacious cost-cutting moment, the effect of light speed (referred to here as "Spectradrive") is evoked by a simple line of dialogue: "What a strange experience... I don't feel anything!"

Directed without distinction by the late George McCowan, whose **FROGS** (1972) was among the best nature-in-revolt films of the '70s, the film does have a certain campy charm if you happen to be in the right mood. Fans of vintage serials like **THE PHANTOM EMPIRE** and **UNDERSEA KINGDOM** should find Carol Lynley and Company's frequent clashes with a bunch of guys in dime-store robot suits to be a nostalgic hoot. Others are

more likely to be stirred to anger as they're reminded of just how low the science fiction genre sank in the post-**STAR WARS** years. Surprisingly, the capable cast takes the material seriously and doesn't condescend—even Palance doesn't go over the top until near the end—which, of course, only emphasizes the ridiculousness of the proceedings. A mixture of awe and pity goes out to the always-dependable Barry Morse as he stares off-camera with teary-eyed wonderment and recites the following with complete conviction: "Out there in the vastness of space... the unknown... where all possibilities exist... and man's future is limited only by his imagination... and his vision of the stars." However, these earnest efforts are constantly undermined by the presence of one of those confounding comic-relief robots that tries to steal every scene.

Looking a lot like one of those mawkish mechanical “wonders” that took away from the otherwise interesting **THE BLACK HOLE** of the same year, Sparks also dominated the film’s ad campaign, his featureless mug taking center stage of the original one-sheet poster (and the cover art for this DVD). Emphasizing hardware and explosions over a smattering of unrecognizable humans scurrying near the bottom like so many ants, this piece of art neatly sums up the dehumanization that science fiction cinema suffered at the time.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME has never before been released on American home video, and I don’t recall ever hearing anyone complain. Nevertheless, if you’re one of the few and the proud that actually *wanted* this title, you’ll be pleased to know that Blue Underground have done a bang-up job on the transfer. While Reginald H. Morris’ photography is a tad soft, the anamorphic video rendering of the 1.64:1 image compensates with deep blacks and bold and beautiful colors. The Dolby Digital 2-channel presentation of the original mono mix is nothing to write home about, but everything comes through loud and clear, including Paul Hoffert’s dreadful disco-symphonic score. Not many extras to report, just a TV spot (in which, through the magic of editing, Jack Palance pushes a button and blows himself up) and an amusing subtitled French trailer wherein the Star Streak is renamed the Star Trek! One extra that didn’t make it to the disc or program booklet, an interview with Barry Morse, can be accessed on Blue Underground’s web site (www.blue-underground.com).

Imports

BLOODY MOON

Die Säge des Todes
aka *Colegiadas Violadas*,
Profondo Tenebre

1980, European Shock DVD
Entertainment #ESD004, DD-2.0/
ST/+, 81m 36s, DVD-2 (PAL)

By Tim Lucas

This Dutch DVD, copyrighted by Japan Shock Video and bearing no company name other than “European Shock DVD Entertainment,” is an entry in “The Jess Franco Collection.” Credited to Jesus Franco, **BLOODY MOON** is an unusual entry in his filmography of this period: it’s a German production filmed on the Costa del Sol, with a larger cast and crew than usual, and—Franco himself excepted—none of his familiar cast members (not even Lina Romay, who acted as his assistant). Its many divergences from the expected Franco profile, which extend to a certain lack of personality, have made it unpopular among his hardcore fans, who often peg it as a cynical sell-out title, a worthless imitation of the already worthless American “body count” movies. But it may be somewhat more than that.

Five years after Miguel (Christopher Bruggel) stabs to death the young woman inhabiting Bungalow #13 at his aunt’s language school, he is released from the psychiatric clinic of Dr. Domingo Aundos (Franco) into the custody of his sister Manuela (Nadja Gerganoff). Unknown to Dr. Aundos, the disfigured Miguel is deeply disturbed by his sexual feelings for Manuela, and frustrated by her refusal to continue their incestuous affair because

the world around them would not approve. “If we could just get rid of everyone around us, then things could be as they were,” she says, while strolling around him, completely naked under a see-through nightgown. Miguel may well get the hint, as other students attending the International Youth-Club Boarding School of Languages start turning up dead—at least, their corpses are discovered by Angela (Olivia Pascal), the current inhabitant of Bungalow #13, whose addiction to murder mysteries may simply be overexciting her imagination. No one else seems to see the dead bodies.

Franco has never discussed his intentions with this film, to my knowledge, but he is much too intelligent to have made such an absurdly stupid movie without deliberation. The crude English dubbing distances us from the production’s vibe just enough to keep its attitude inscrutable, but **BLOODY MOON** (whose script is credited to “Rayo Casablanca”) can be viewed either as an unusually inept film of its kind, or as a raucous, tongue-in-cheek lampoon of the “teens-in-distress” and “body count” cycles of the ’70s and ’80s. As a true *amator* of the fantastic cinema, Franco surely felt despair in response to what movies like **FRIDAY THE 13TH** and **PROM NIGHT** were making of the genre, and he pokes ruthless fun at the inane teenage prattle of such movies—as in this scene of a girl working a cross-word puzzle:

“What’s a capital offense ending in R?”

“Murder.”

“Oh yeah! Murder!”

This hapless bit of set-dressing is just one of the tip-offs that Franco is aiming at satire rather



One of the less fortunate cast members of *BLOODY MOON*, Jess Franco's answer to the teens-in-peril movies of the 1970s.

than real horror, as is the fact that the killer in the opening **HALLOWEEN** pastiche is wearing a Mickey Mouse mask and that none—literally, not one—of the corpses are seen or discovered by anyone other than Angela, even when a naked stabwound victim is shown hanging in plain sight, inside a wardrobe bureau, in a room occupied by three or more of her classmates. Likewise, Miguel's bizarre disfigurement is never explained, nor does anyone on the faculty raise an eyebrow when Angela is the only girl still attending classes at school—though there is, ultimately, a reason for this. The sex-crazed victims are insanely stupid, with one gabby, libidinous girl (Inga, played by an

unbilled Jasmin Losensky) so eager to get laid that she allows herself to be taken to an abandoned sawmill and tied to the rig by her date—a masked man whose identity she doesn't even know! Contrarily, the murders are gruesome enough to take seriously, and Franco (who photographed the film under the pseudonym Juan Solar) lights the dead bodies with a sense of style that shows him to be an admirer of Mario Bava's innovations in this field, as do the mystery-reading habits of Angela, à la **THE GIRL WHO KNEW TOO MUCH**, and the climax, which reveals that the murders have been committed by an unsuspected couple whose secret tryst is interrupted by the arrival of a

betrayed, pasty-faced lover with a split head, à la **BLOOD AND BLACK LACE**. The *hommage* was apparently not lost on Pedro Almodóvar, who used a montage of scenes from **BLOOD AND BLACK LACE** and **BLOODY MOON** at the beginning of his film **MATADOR** (1986). The grand finale offers a few more memorable lines, like "I don't care about your body—I want your money!" and "Don't tell me, because you killed a few girls for me, you expect to be my partner!" before the inevitable not-dead-yet surprise pounce and other restagings of the *de rigueur*. The lumpen space/disco score, which whips one Pink Floydish track to death, is credited to Gerhard Heinz, and a featured song ("Love in the Shadows" by Frank Duval) was released as a single in Europe. Lovably dumb, in a way that only improves in a room full of like-minded friends, **BLOODY MOON** is at once more stylish than the films it lampoons and a funnier, more insightful expose of the subgenre's weaknesses than **SCARY MOVIE** or **SATURDAY THE 14TH**. Some of our readers may wish to be forewarned of a scene in which a snake dangling from a tree, precariously near our heroine, is decapitated with garden shears—a shot that could easily have been faked, but isn't.

This DVD offers a somewhat sharper image than the 1980s VHS release, but it is not an optimal presentation of the film. The brightness is set a little high, requiring some monitor adjustment to produce correct black levels, and the 1.85:1 image has been cropped to standard mode. (It does not zoom well on a widescreen set.) The mono sound is a little thin, which is probably the fault of the French-produced English dub's technical limitations, rather than the

disc production. English is the only audio option (the lip movements indicate that most of the cast are speaking English... badly), and the sole subtitle option is Dutch. An English language theatrical trailer (1m 37s) is included, as is one for another Franco DVD offering from this company, **LINDA** (2m 47s), whose narrator seems to be under the impression that the movie is called "Pleasure Island." The only other supplement, a "slideshow," is nothing more than a miserable scrolling of screen grabs from the movie. A synopsis, containing far more information than the movie itself delivers, is included in a fold-out brochure, full of misspellings (the murders are "biestly") and other inaccuracies. Only eight untitled chapter marks are encoded.

Available domestically from Xploited Cinema (see Sources), priced at \$23.95.

THE KILLER SNAKES

Se sat sou (Cantonese)

She sha shou (Mandarin)

"Snake Killer"

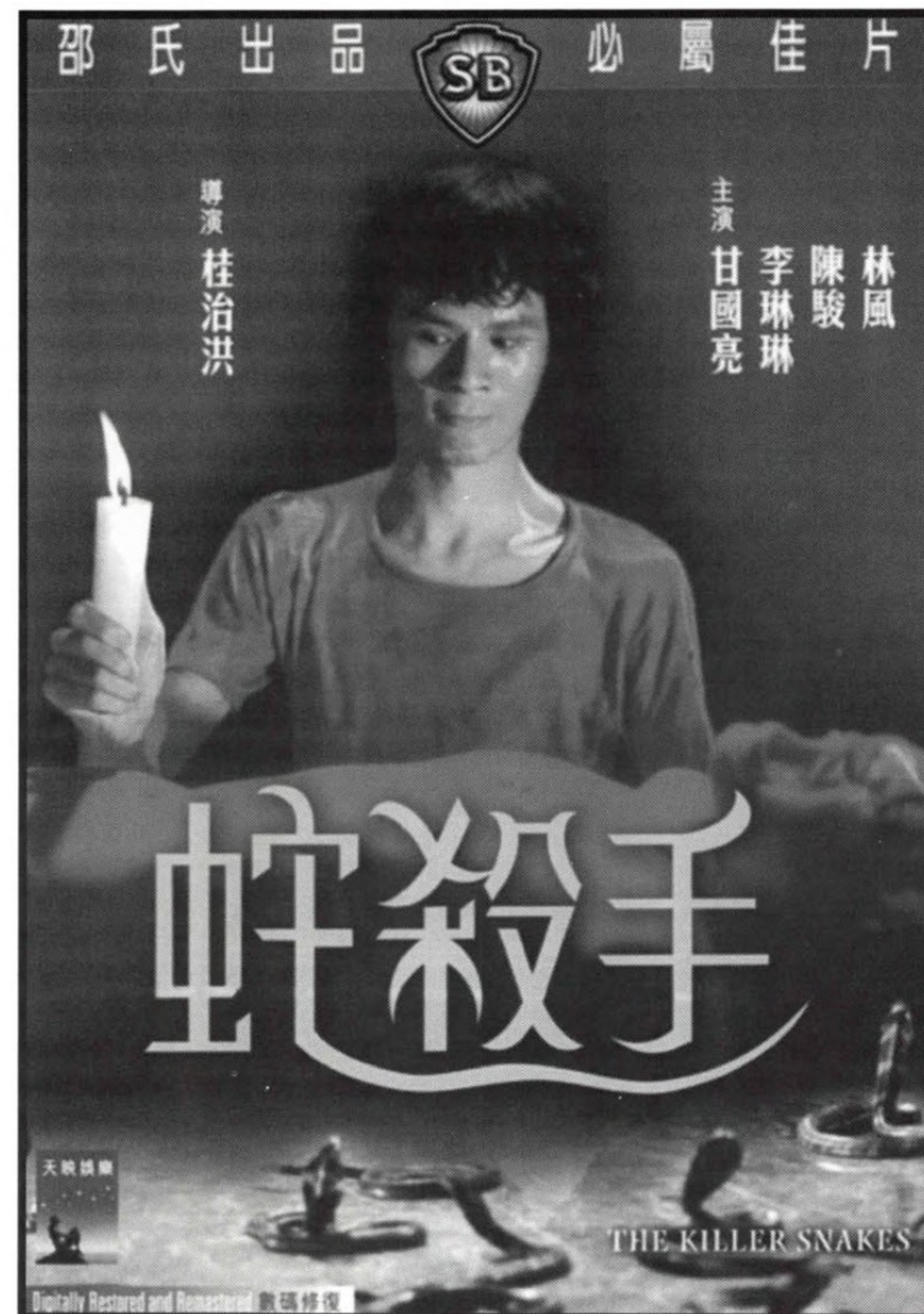
1974, Intercontinental Video

#611940, DD-2.0/LB/ST/+,

\$18.99, 94m 30s, DVD-3

By John Charles

Shaw Brothers' answer to **WILLARD** (1971), this incredibly sordid HK thriller mixes disturbing horror, perverse sex, and animal cruelty into a most unsavory brew. Homely, put-upon Chen Zhihong (**PURPLE STORM**'s Kam Kwok-leung) lives a miserable existence in a rundown hovel next to a snake emporium (where the owner removes and sells the live animals' gall bladders as an aphrodisiac). His only friend is Xiujuan (**THE PRODIGAL BOXER**'s Maggie Li Lin-lin), a pretty and sympathetic girl who sells toys in the local outdoor market. One evening, however, Zhihong



receives a most unusual visitor who becomes his closest confidant. A mutilated reptile from the neighboring shop slithers in and allows the youth to nurse it back to health. Naming the snake Xiaobiao, Zhihong soon finds that his good samaritanism has won him the trust of several other reptiles as well; however, his troubles with humans continue unabated, as he is beaten, robbed, and humiliated by a prostitute and her cohorts. Even his faith in Xiujuan is shattered when she stands him up one evening for a date (though, unbeknownst to Zhihong, it is for a legitimate

reason). Sating his loneliness with S&M magazines, Zhihong's frustrations and desperation finally send him completely over the edge, prompting the youth to simultaneously indulge his desires for both sex and revenge.

In sharp contrast to the usual Shaw Brothers gloss, director Kuei Chi-hong (**THE BAMBOO HOUSE OF DOLLS**, **SPIRIT OF THE RAPED**) concentrates on the squalor and ugliness of life for HK's inner city poor. This is heightened by prolific screenwriter Ngai Hong's screenplay, peopled almost exclusively by exceedingly unpleasant and debased

characters. Unlike Kuei's **THE BOXER'S OMEN** (1983; reviewed 64:7), with its outrageously weird creatures and over-the-top grue, this movie lacks levity of any kind to diminish its dark and depraved mood. That thick, oppressively sleazy atmosphere is also boosted by a horn-and-pan-flute-based score that becomes every bit as delirious as the flashback and sex fantasy visuals it accompanies. Freely mixing horror/revenge elements with bondage, S&M and other sexual perversities (like violation by snake with a suggestion of the victim's arousal), **THE KILLER SNAKES** ventures far more deeply into adult horror territory than many Western productions of the time dared. Even almost 30 years after it was produced, this remains a potent and disturbing little picture, as equally nihilistic in mood and intent as the director's later martial arts classic **KILLER CONSTABLE** (aka **LIGHTNING KUNG FU**, 1980). As mentioned above, reptiles are mistreated and destroyed in myriad ways, with little or no special effect simulation, so animal lovers should definitely give this one a miss.

THE KILLER SNAKES was issued stateside in an English-dubbed version by Howard Mahler Films and that edition was released on tape in the early 1990s by Something Weird Video [reviewed VW 14:16]. Derived from one of the scratchiest and most deteriorated prints we have ever seen, its 2.35:1 presentation clocked in at 90m 41s and carried an "X" on the box, which certainly seemed appropriate. However, a check with the MPAA database reveals that the movie was only awarded an "R" rating; whether the board was given a tamer version than the one that was eventually released, we

cannot say. In spite of its poor condition, nothing seemed to be missing from SWV's source material.

In the wake of the cut **HUMAN LANTERNS** [VW 94:68], there was some worry among collectors about just how complete the **KILLER SNAKES** DVD would be, particularly when HK censors let it slip through with a "IIB" rating, instead of the adults-only "III." As it turns out, the disc (a PAL conversion which would run 98m 32s at 24 fps) includes several minutes of additional material not found in the US print. During the sequence where Zhihong is having one his sado-masochistic fantasies, the scene stops at 29:25 on the SWV version but continues on for approximately 90s more on the disc, showing him dripping candle wax on the bound victim (a still from this bit is featured on the DVD cover). Also extended is the sequence where Zhihong lets the snakes have their way with the prostitute. Near the end of this bit, the Mandarin version includes a second B&W flashback scene which shows the whipping the boy's masochistic mother endured before having bound sex with her boyfriend, events only heard in the flashback that opens the picture. In addition, a komodo dragon attack is extended on the DVD, incorporating three insert shots of the beasts' claws scratching the victim. Dropped entirely from the American release is a sequence where supporting character Hu Baochun is with the unconscious Xiujuan; when she comes to, he knocks the girl out and rapes her. He then goes home and falls asleep, only to wake up and find his home infested with snakes. While Hu is trying to escape, the American

version drops the portion where the man is besieged by serpents that literally lunge into the air at him. He responds by slicing the flying killers in half with a sword (no special effects, unfortunately), the dismembered pieces shown writhing on the floor. The tape also tends to be missing a few seconds at the beginning and ends of reels, not surprising, considering how battered they are. However, the DVD is also missing one bit at a reel end (at 20:54, there should be a few more seconds to the sequence in which Zhihong is fired from his delivery boy job). Celestial's element was textless, so the credits have been recreated and video-burned on.

As with the other SB restorations thus far, the non-anamorphic 2.35:1 image looks absolutely spotless, accurately colored, and nicely detailed. Some will no doubt feel that the polished presentation detracts from the movie's grindhouse appeal, but we are more than happy to chuck the SWV tape in its favor. The audio has no serious flaws and subtitles are available in English, Traditional Chinese, Malaysian, and Indonesian. The original trailer has, regrettably, not been included—just a video promo spot and ones for four other titles. The "Movie Information" section offers the original poster, five stills, "production notes" (which merely replicate the single paragraph write-up on the packaging), and abbreviated bios/filmographies for the director, Kam (which incorrectly list him as the director of **A TERRACOTTA WARRIOR**), and four other performers.

This import disc is available from Poker Industries (see Sources).





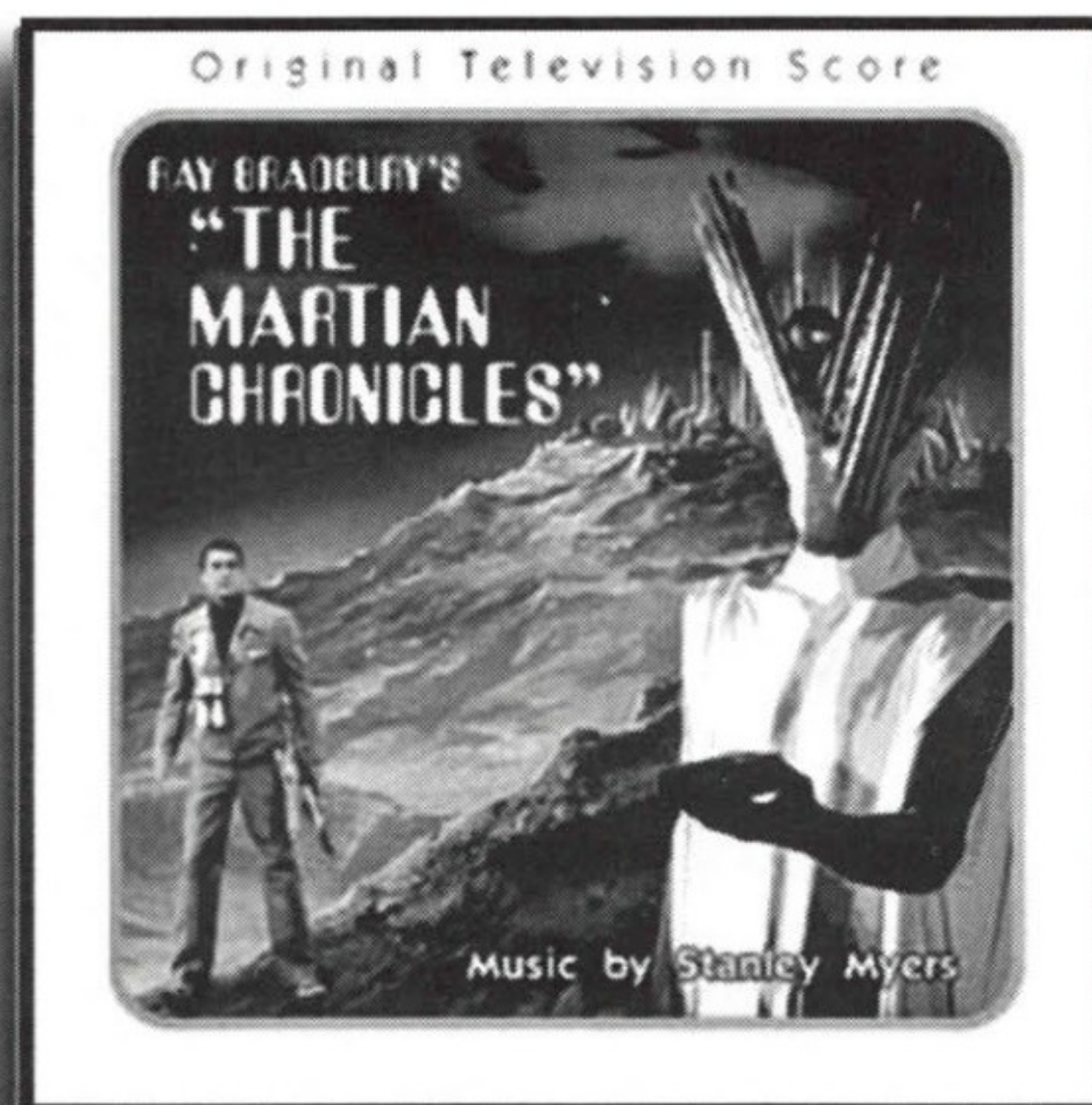
By Douglas E. Winter

Mars Needs Myers

Asksed to comment on the soundtrack for the 1980 television miniseries adaptation of *THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES*, Ray Bradbury said: "The film was so boring, I don't really remember the music. Was it any good?" Fortunately, Christopher Landry's memory is far better and, after years of persistence, he has produced a loving tribute to Stanley Myers' score—which was the best thing about the series (Airstrip One AOD 003, \$19.95, 36 tracks, 68m 53s).

Born in Birmingham, England, in 1933, Stanley Myers' early career was overshadowed by fellow countryman John Barry. After paying his dues with the BBC, writing for *DOCTOR WHO* and other programs, Myers' first feature assignment was Jack Smight's *KALEIDOSCOPE* (1966). Over the next 25 years, Myers worked at a remarkable pace, scoring almost 120 film and television projects ranging from *THE NIGHT OF THE FOLLOWING DAY* (1968) and *THE APPRENTICESHIP OF DUDDY KRAVITZ* (1974) to *HOUSE OF WHIPCORD* (1974) and *SCHIZO* (1976) to *PRICK UP YOUR EARS* (1987) and *SARAFINA!* (1992)—obtaining well-deserved fame along the way for *THE DEER HUNTER* (1978).

THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES showcases the best of Myers' music for the six-hour series, and its varied styles remind us that Myers was one of the first composers effectively to merge electronica



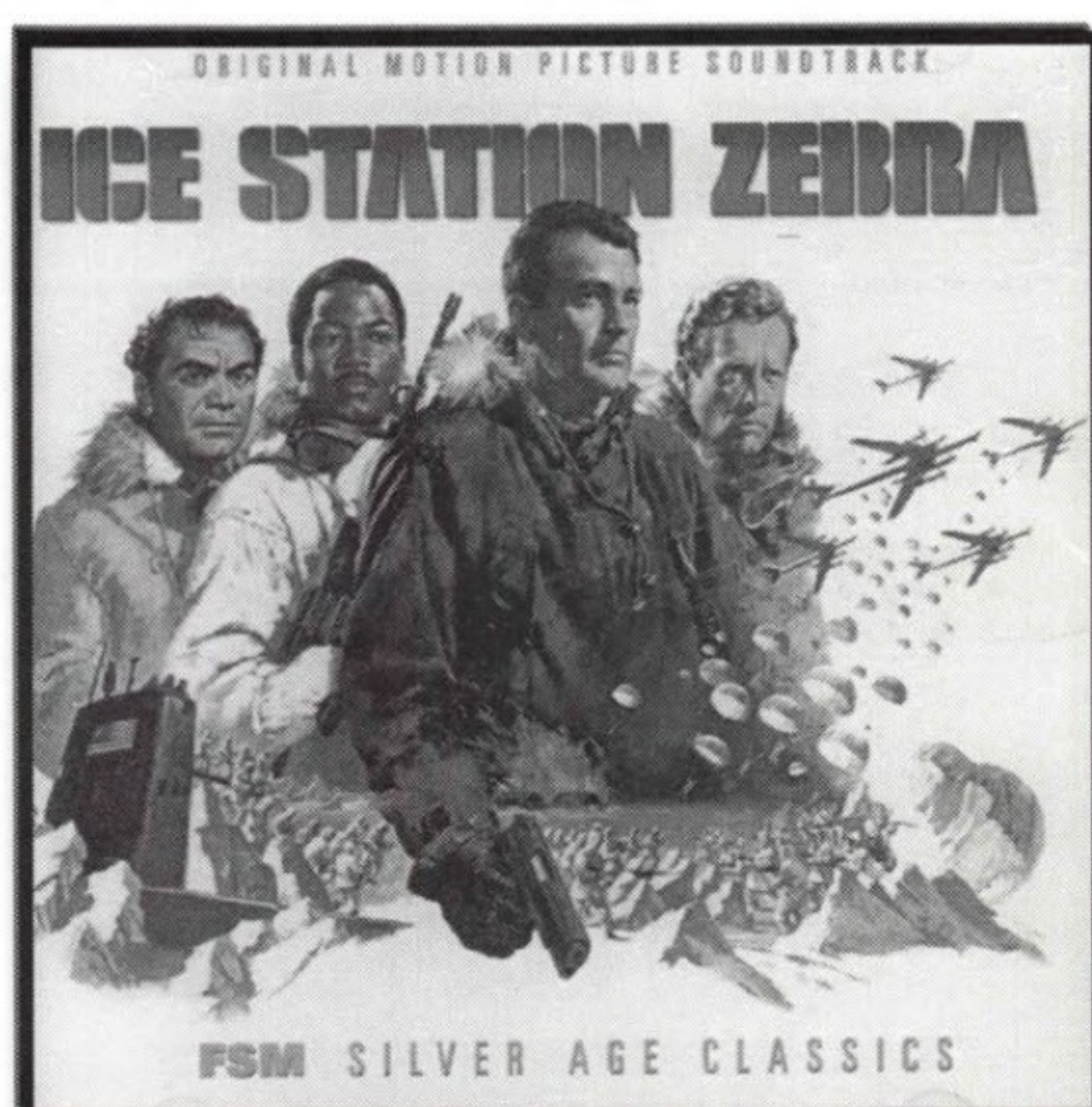
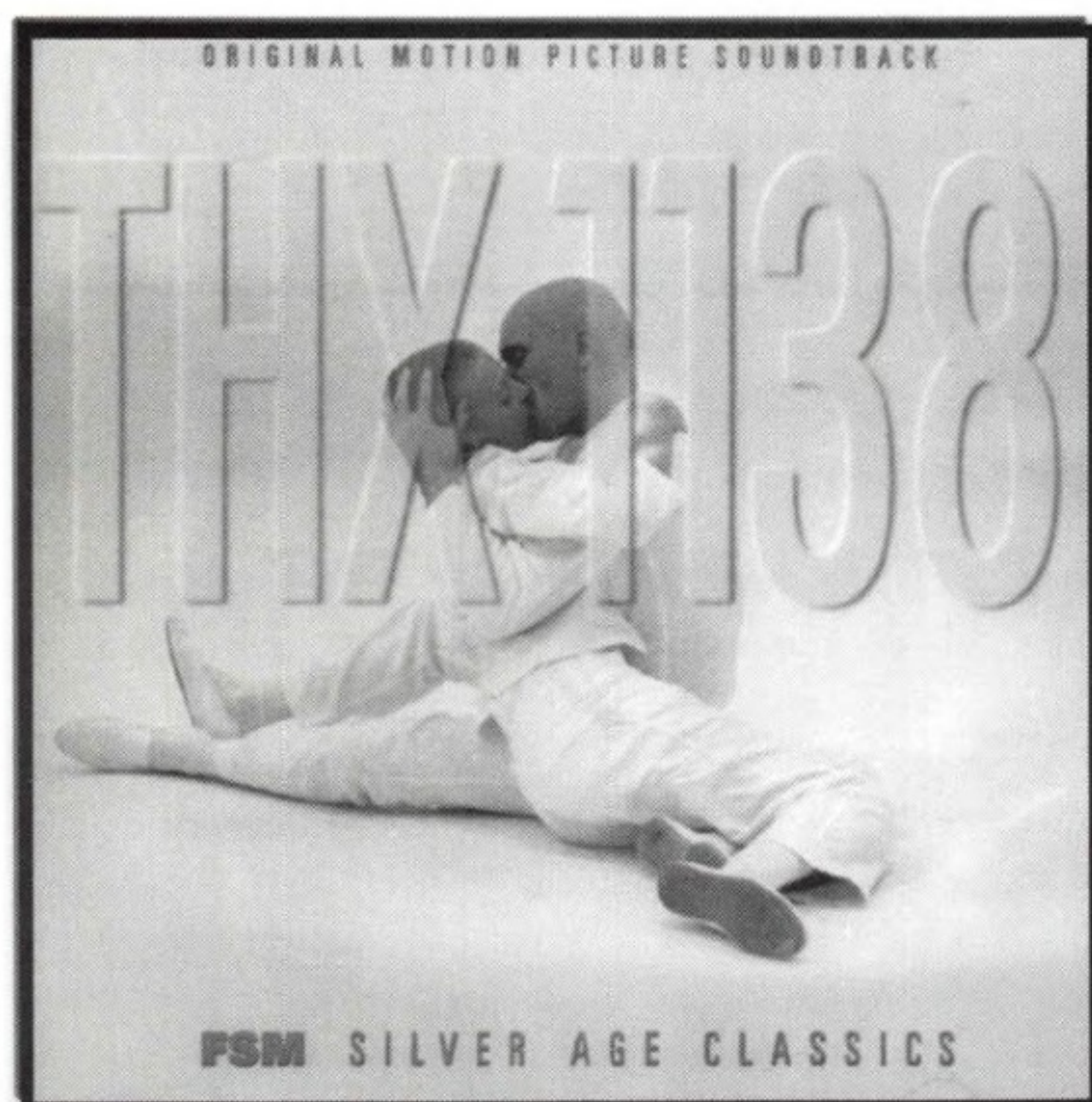
with classical symphonic compositions—and indeed, some of today's first electronic/symphonic composers (including Hans Zimmer, Harry Gregson-Williams, and Richard Harvey) trained and collaborated with Myers in London.

The music of this limited edition CD is matched with a handsome 24-page booklet, which features a fine selection of photographs, poster art, and design sketches, as well as reminiscences from Zimmer, director Michael Anderson, and actor Bernie Casey. For more information contact airstripone@earthlink.net.

THX 1138

In a decade far, far away, George Lucas completed his first feature film, *THX 1138* (1971), whose music—composed with deft versatility by Lalo Schifrin—has finally made its premier appearance courtesy of Film Score Monthly (FSM Vol. 6 No. 4, \$19.95, 18 tracks, 55m 45s). Although structured around dark and brooding liturgical cues—and concluding with Bach's "St. Matthew's Passion"—Schifrin's score veers into the *avant-garde* and also includes deranged futuristic Muzak. Several passages not used in the finished film or distorted in its sound design are included in their original versions.

Also new and notable from FSM is the complete release of Michel Legrand's memorable score for John Sturges' *ICE STATION ZEBRA* (FSM Vol. 6 No. 2, \$19.95, 79m 20s)—reportedly Howard Hughes' favorite film during his declining "Masque of the Red Death" years. With its bold title themes



and magnificent orchestrations, this music had been available previously only on a brief 30m vinyl LP and Pendulum CD; thus FSM's edition, which includes deleted and truncated cues, nearly triples the music and the delight. To order or to obtain additional information, contact FSM at 8503 Washington Blvd., Culver City CA 90232 or visit filmscoremonthly.com. VW readers can request a free trial copy of FILM SCORE MONTHLY by mail or by writing to info@filmscoremonthly.com.

Turning Japanese

The less said about Brian De Palma's **FEMME FATALE** (2002), the better... except to note the exceptional soundtrack by Ryuichi Sakamoto that, given the film's lesser virtues, has to date been issued only in Japan (Warner Music Japan WPC6-10232, approx. \$31.95, 14 tracks, 62m 22s). The disc opens with "Bolerish," the 13m 40s riff on Ravel's "Bolero" that powered the film's overheated heist sequence, then moves into realms more familiar to devotees of both the composer and the director. Sakamoto's signature keyboard exercises and electronic beats clash, then cohere with churning orchestral passages that evoke, and at times imitate, De Palma's favorite composer, Bernard Herrmann. The entertaining disc concludes with solo piano versions of "Bolerish" and the beautiful "Lost Theme."

Another Japan-only title from Sakamoto is his elegant score for Nagisa Oshima's **Gohatto** ("Taboo") (Warner Music Japan WPC6-10063, approx. \$29.95, 21 tracks, 64m 45s), whose E.U. release

in 2000 went quickly out of print. Minimalist and moody, this music threads Eastern traditions with delicate keyboards and the symphonic in the style of Sakamoto's well-known compositions for Oshima's **Senjou no Merii Kurisumasu** ("Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence" (1983). As with **FEMME FATALE**, the CD concludes with a bonus solo piano performance of its opening cue. Further details about these releases is available at the composer's official website, sitesakamoto.com.

Last, but certainly not least, is Masamichi Amano's original soundtrack for everyone's favorite memoir of schooldays, **BATTLE ROYALE**—which, although available on compact disc for only a blink of the eye in Japan, has been released in an E.U. edition (Universal France/Milan 198 570-2, approx. \$18.99, 23 tracks, 70m 54s). Although sometimes lost among the crazed carnage of the film, the score is a symphonic/choral triumph that stands well on its own; it is quite Western in style, as exemplified by classical passages from Verdi, Strauss, Schubert, and Bach, which Amano often fuses into his own music.

Like the Sakamoto releases, **BATTLE ROYALE** is difficult to find in North America, but well worth the search. For further information, visit milanrecords.com.

The Audio Watchdog may be contacted on line at OnEyeDog@aol.com. Review and promotional materials should be sent c/o Vale House, 2495 Oakton Hills Drive, Oakton VA 22124.



BIBLIO WATCHDOG

THE ZOMBIE MOVIE ENCYCLOPEDIA

By Peter Dendle

McFarland & Company, Inc.

Box 611, Jefferson, NC, 28640

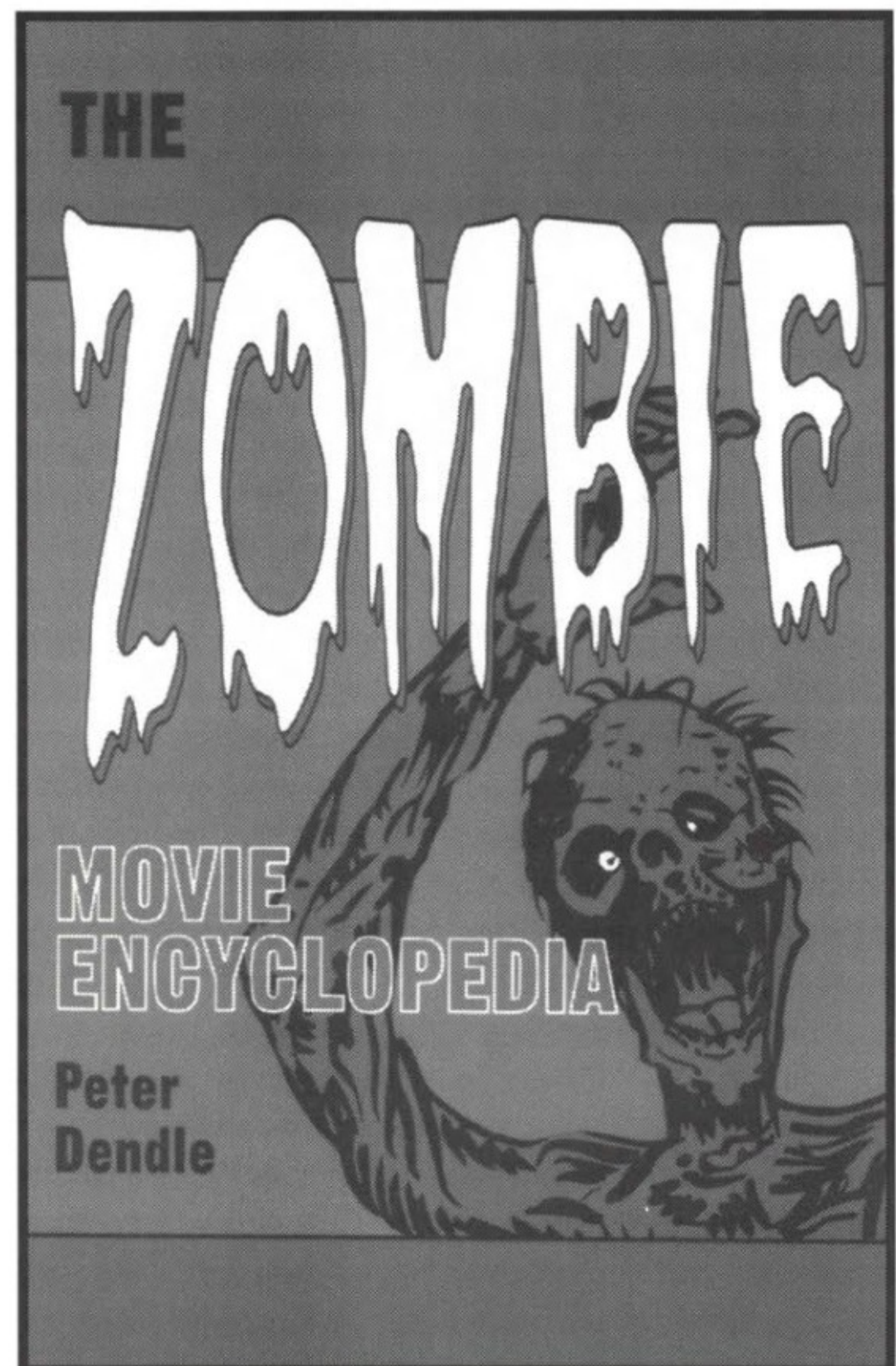
www.mcfarlandpub.com

259 pp., \$35 (hardcover) plus \$4.00
shipping and handling from the publisher

Reviewed by
Richard Harland Smith

Touted by McFarland & Company as “the first exhaustive overview of the subject,” Peter Dendle’s *THE ZOMBIE MOVIE ENCYCLOPEDIA* trumps *THE DARK SIDE*’s recent *ZOMBIE* anthology [reviewed VW 66:76] by fleshing-out to book length what was in that earlier work merely an appendix. While *ZOMBIE* was hamstrung by the snarky posturing of its contributors, *THE ZOMBIE MOVIE ENCYCLOPEDIA* plays it straight for the most part and is the more satisfying read. An assistant professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, Dendle brings to this project a ready wit and a vocabulary more illustrative than grandstanding. When the author praises the “delirious—almost narcotic—surrealism” of such zombie classics as Amando de Ossorio’s *TOMBS OF THE BLIND DEAD* or Jess Franco’s *A VIRGIN AMONG THE LIVING DEAD*, readers may trust that he is trying neither to overpraise nor to apologize for the sub-genre, but only to understand it. We’ll bite.

Patterned after *THE PSYCHOTRONIC ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FILM*, *THE ZOMBIE MOVIE ENCYCLOPEDIA* is sorted alphabetically, from Claudio Fragasso’s *AFTER DEATH* (1988) to Ken Dixon’s “shameless zombie buffet” *ZOMBIETHON* (1986). While Dendle covers the classics—Victor Halperin’s *WHITE ZOMBIE* (1932), the Val Lewton-produced *I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE* (1942), George Romero’s *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* (1968) and its sequels, and Stuart Gordon’s *RE-ANIMATOR* (1985)—he also sheds light on such lesser-known and seldom-discussed productions as Edward L. Cahn’s *THE FOUR SKULLS OF JONATHAN DRAKE* (1959), Willard



Huyck’s *MESSIAH OF EVIL* (filmed 1972, released 1975) and John Bud Cardos’ *MUTANT* (1984), as well as product imported from Mexico (*SANTO VS. BLACK MAGIC*), from Spain (the Paul Naschy vehicle *VENGEANCE OF THE ZOMBIES*) and from Italy (Pupi Avati’s *ZEDER*); attention is paid also to the DIY school of zombie filmmaking, typified by the sticky likes of J.R. Bookwalter’s *THE DEAD NEXT DOOR* (1989) and Scooter McCrae’s *SHATTER DEAD* (1993). Going the extra mile, Dendle even dissects such related one-offs such as Michael Jackson’s *THRILLER* (1984) video and *LINNEA QUIGLEY’S HORROR WORK-OUT* (1989), as well as episodes of various TV series (*THE MAN FROM*

U.N.C.L.E., THE NIGHT STALKER, THE SIMPSONS, SOUTH PARK) that have dealt—soberly or tongue-in-rotted-cheek—with voodoo and/or zombiism.

What elevates THE ZOMBIE MOVIE ENCYCLOPEDIA above the level of knee-jerk opinion is the author's choice to maintain a running commentary on how the definition and depiction of zombiism in each film relates to the mythos as a whole. In Steve Sekely's Monogram programmer **REVENGE OF THE ZOMBIES** (1944), Dendle identifies the new wrinkle of zombie deanimation via destruction of the brain—a key tenet in George Romero's "living dead" canon and in many zombie films that followed. Likewise, Edward L. Cahn's "ungainly and vacuous" **THE ZOMBIES OF MORATAU** (1957) advances the use of fire as a zombie repellent and also offers the first appearance of aquatic zombies, a variation that would be revived in Ken Wiederhorn's **SHOCK WAVES** (1977) and Jean Rollin's **ZOMBIE LAKE** (1980). Rocket science it ain't, but Dendle's appreciation of the history is more than half the fun. One could gripe about the gaps in Dendle's syllabus; the author deserves credit for digging up the voodoo-themed "Sibao" episode of THE SAINT (starring "oily Roger Moore") but fails to follow through with what seems like an obvious segue—to Moore's involvement with voodoo a decade later in his James Bond debut **LIVE AND LET DIE** (1973). Similarly, Dendle's review of Charles McCrann's **TOXIC ZOMBIES** (aka **BLOODEATERS**) should have mentioned that co-star John Amplas was a stock player for zombie-meister George Romero, but instead cracks wise about the film's "dubious" prominence as the first redneck zombie movie. If Dendle falls short of the infectious sarcasm that writers like Michael Weldon or Steve Puchalski have in spades, THE ZOMBIE MOVIE ENCYCLOPEDIA remains a worthwhile and informative little book. However devoted to the appreciation of mindless entertainment, Peter Dendle is a writer who tries his hardest to aim for the brain.

THE REMARKABLE MICHAEL REEVES: HIS SHORT AND TRAGIC LIFE

By John B. Murray

Cinematics Publishing

3 Lee Road, London NW7 1LJ, England

360 pp., £16.99, softcover

Reviewed by Tim Lucas

Anyone who manages to direct three feature films by the age of 25 can certainly lay claim to the epithet "remarkable," and on this count alone, Michael Leith Reeves (1943-1970) is worthy

of having his short but fertile life researched, commemorated and analyzed. David Pirie's A HERITAGE OF HORROR: THE ENGLISH GOTHIC CINEMA 1946-72 was undoubtedly the flashpoint of his legend, praising the uniformity of vision that bonded **THE SHE BEAST** (1966), **THE SORCERERS** (1967) and **WITCHFINDER GENERAL** (aka **THE CONQUEROR WORM**, 1968). In the thirty years since its publication, Reeves' reputation has begun to falter somewhat, as younger people have continued to break into the industry—like Bryan Singer and Ethan Hawke, both of whom directed films in their early 20s. But, Reeves included, no one has yet managed to outdo what Orson Welles did at age 25; the important distinction is that Reeves never made it that far, yet managed to make films which are still being remembered, seriously discussed and taken extremely personally by some people.

John B. Murray's book is bound to excite them, as it is based on numerous interviews with the late director's personal and professional cronies, which were conducted over a dedication-confirming period of nearly 15 years. A 32-page B&W photo signature near the center of the book offers rare family photos; a 1966 page from Reeves' own diary; a xeroxed portion of Vincent Price's apologetic letter to Reeves, written after a preview screening of **WITCHFINDER GENERAL**; and many other treasures. The reader starved for information will lap up this information hungrily and gratefully, but as the feast goes on, there is a mounting feeling of "second verse, same as the first." This is not a long book, but what length it has is built up with endless repetitions of information by one interviewee after another (we're told that he saw Don Siegel's **THE KILLERS** about a hundred times about a hundred times), unedited quotations, unsynthesized research (there is no attempt to pool and compare reminiscences to arrive at the likeliest truth), and the author's own unseemly, fawning reverence for his subject, which somehow co-exists with his equally unseemly third-person references to "Mike." There is also the unavoidable problem encountered by Patrick Humphries in his biography of English folk musician Nick Drake (who had much in common, personally and artistically, with Reeves): 25 years is not just a brief life, it's an incomplete one—mentally as well as emotionally.

These factors conspire to make THE REMARKABLE MICHAEL REEVES closer in accomplishment to **THE SHE BEAST** than **WITCHFINDER GENERAL**. It's the work of an inspired amateur, enthusiastic but sloppy, full of rough edges but informative and entertaining. Nevertheless, the definitive study remains to be written.



THE LETTERBOX



PUTTING OUR PANIC IN ORDER

I noticed an error in Bill Cooke's otherwise excellent review of J.L. Moctezuma's **ALUCARDA** [VW 95:66]. Cooke notes that Moctezuma co-founded the "Panic Theatre" with Alejandro Jodorowsky, when in fact it had been founded years prior by Roland Topor, Fernando Arrabal and Jodorowsky.

There is a bit of confusion regarding the Panic movement, no doubt informed by Jodorowsky and Arrabal's less than

perfect recollections and intentional deceptions (ie., Surrealist actions). Having spoken with both men, I am nearing completion on an English language biography of Jodorowsky, and it is clear that the Panic movement began in the early '60's (perhaps 1963) in Paris. It was a rag-tag ensemble of various anarchists and artists who, infatuated with the Surrealists, decided to create a new theatre much like the Theatre of Cruelty. While Topor (artist and animator) Arrabal (director of **VIVA LA MUERTE!** and **I WILL WALK LIKE A CRAZY HORSE**, both recently released

on DVD by Cult Epics) and Jodorowsky (**EL TOPO**, **THE HOLY MOUNTAIN**) founded the movement—naming it after the god Pan—there were many European artists and actors involved, including Olivier O. Olivier and Abel Ogier. The idea behind "Panic" was entropy and the whole thing lived and died quickly, with happenings all over Europe and the US.

Robert H. Harris and Paul Brinegar reminisce about the good old days of American International in HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER.

Moctezuma came in contact with the group when Jodorowsky returned to Mexico in 1967 and began working in the "panic-mode" with some theatrical troops. Moctezuma's association was slight in the grand scheme of things "*panique*," but he did contribute significantly to the Surrealist art of Mexico and, in particular, the blossoming of Jodorowsky's panic film enterprise that started with **FANDO AND LIS**.

Rayo Casablanca
e-mail

*We asked, and the author of this letter is not the same Rayo Casablanca who is the credited screenwriter of Jess Franco's **BLOODY MOON**, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. It would have been a nice coincidence, but this "Rayo Casablanca" is a reader who prefers to be... pseudonymous.*

ENDLESS SUMMER

I enjoyed John Charles' review of the **WES CRAVEN'S SUMMER OF FEAR** DVD [VW 96:17]. However, Mr. Charles is incorrect when he states that "the film premiered on NBC in a slightly re-edited version called **STRANGER IN OUR HOUSE**, while Craven's original cut was released to overseas theaters in 1979 as **SUMMER OF FEAR**. As the title of their version reveals, Artisan has utilized the latter..."

The Artisan DVD, while titled **SUMMER OF FEAR**, is actually the original version that was first broadcast in 1978, not the foreign version, which was shorter. The original NBC version, titled **STRANGER IN OUR HOUSE**, ran 98m, the standard length for a TV movie designed

ERRATA

96:34 In Nicolas Barbano's fine article on **REPTILICUS** the meaning of one of his sentences got garbled in the editing process. The bracketed words should not have appeared in the following sentence: "According to a conversation I had on December 12, 1991, with Saga's manager Flemming John Olsen, a single print [of **REPTILICUS**] remained in Denmark, where for years Saga kept sending it out to cinemas, hoping to find someone who would release it..." The film referenced in this instance is Sid Pink's **JOURNEY TO THE SEVENTH PLANET**, which was discussed on the preceding page. We regret the error.

96:49 We're informed that those "wonderfully lurid horror fiction magazine covers from the 1970s" which appear on the **BLOOD FREAK** DVD are actually covers of oversized, B&W comic books from the 1970s. The interiors featured reprints from 1950s comics, often retouched to include extra gore.

Our review of the **BLUE SUNSHINE** DVD misidentified the audio commentary interviewer as Edwin Samuelson; it was actually Howard Berger.

96:54 **HORROR RISES FROM THE TOMB** is cited as a film unavailable on DVD but, in truth, it's available (however unauthorized) on the double-disc Brentwood set called **HORROR RISES FROM THE GRAVE**, which wasn't mentioned in our Brentwood article.

96:59 In the review of **KANSAS CITY CONFIDENTIAL**, we referenced "Orson Welles' **THE THIRD MAN** and **TOUCH OF EVIL**." of course, Welles did not direct **THE THIRD MAN**; Carol Reed did.

96:62 **NAKED EVIL** did have a US release by Hampton International, and was not "unreleased" as we reported. Independent-International then re-released it (tinted) on a triple bill with **THE GORILLA GANG** and **BLOOD OF GHASTLY HORROR**, years before the added scenes with Lawrence Tierney resulted in the reworked edition known as **EXORCISM AT MIDNIGHT**.

*Thanks to Nicolas Barbano, Howard Berger,
Les Daniels and Chris Poggiali.*

to fill a two-hour TV spot. The foreign theatrical version, titled **SUMMER OF FEAR**, ran 94m and deleted some superfluous dialogue scenes, most notably a scene between Linda Blair and Jeff East. This shorter version was the one released on Beta and VHS in the US by Thorn-EMI/HBO in the late 1980s.

Paul Talbot
Columbia SC

John Charles responds:
Thank you for the correction. I got this info about the different versions of the film from the DVD commentary.

MESSIAH OF LOCK-UPS

Just wanted to let you know something about the **MESSIAH OF EVIL** disc on Brentwood's **TALES OF TERROR** compilation [VW 96:4]. The disc completely freezes around Chapter 6 and does not work after that. It happens when Joy Bang is in the movie theater and the citizens of the town start filling all the seats behind her, ready to kill her. The disc then freezes and cannot be forwarded. I'm not the only one that has had this problem. When I reported the problem on my website (www.critcononline.com), I received dozens of emails stating the same thing has happened to them. I own 3 different brands of DVD players and also DVD-ROM drives on my computers and it always freezes at the same spot. Thank God I still have my VHS version of this film, which is one of the eeriest films I have ever seen. Apparently, your reviewer did not watch the complete film on the Brentwood disc. You may want to tell your readers in a future

issue. Maybe Brentwood will fix this problem on future pressings.

Fred Adelman
West Patterson NJ

*That was my review... or news story. It's true I didn't watch the whole film while reviewing this set; I had seen **MESSIAH OF EVIL** recently and the piece was written on deadline, so I simply checked the a/v quality and running time. Thanks for pointing this out.*

CLOSING UP SHOP

Just thought I'd let you know, in case you hadn't already heard, that Grapevine Video will be closing up shop at the end of November after 25 years in business. They announced this in their last flyer and it's also posted on their web site. I know that you have reviewed a few of their tapes in the past so thought you might be interested.

They also have DVD-Rs now (since last Fall actually) with about 80+ titles currently available and more to come before they close up. So you might want to let anyone know that if they'd like any of Grapevine's tapes or DVD-Rs, they had better order them before the end of November.

Joe Moore
Phoenix AZ

*We're always sorry to see videotape companies close their doors. In the past, I've reviewed Grapevine's **MACISTE IN HELL** [VW 76:12] and **TIGRIS** [VW 81:18], both of which I liked. Interested readers can visit them online at www.grapevinevideo.com. They will continue to accept orders through November 29, 2003.*

SOURCES

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